

The Spirit and Witness:

Listening to Luke 4:18-20

Shirley C. Guthrie, Jr.
Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia

I. WHO HAS THE SPIRIT?

Well, the Christians are bickering among themselves again. In some ways it is just another version of the old argument about whether the Christian individual or the Christian community is more important. Which takes precedence—individuals who are born again, converted, saved and claimed by the Gospel; or the church with its preaching and sacraments, creeds and confessions? But now that old argument has taken a new twist: who has the Spirit? Individual Christians who have personally experienced and manifested in their lives the working of the Spirit, or the church to whom the Spirit is promised? Is the Spirit more likely to be present in a home or dorm room where a small group of like-minded Christians gather, or in an ordinary worship service on Sunday morning or in a seminary chapel? Who are right—the charismatics and pentecostals and so-called pietists, or plain, old, ordinary, everyday church members?

Both sides, of course, quote scripture to prove they are right. One side likes the book of Acts and defends its claim to the Spirit by pointing out the repetition in individuals today of the same personal experiences and supernatural gifts we hear about when the first Christians were baptized with the Spirit. The other side likes Paul and defends its claim to the Spirit by quoting those texts which say that the Spirit is given for the common good, to edify and build up the church. The Paul-quoters say the Acts-quoters are a bunch of fanatics who are destroying the church with their self-righteous spiritualistic individualism. And the Acts-quoters say the Paul-quoters are squelching the Spirit with their boring, dead, uncommitted institutional church.

Then of course there are the peace-makers who assure us that *both* sides are right. It is not a matter of individual or community but individual and community, not Acts or Paul but Act and Paul, not personal religious experience or the church but Spirit-filled individuals and a Spirit-filled church. Nobody is wrong. Everybody is right. So why don't we just stop fighting and be friends. "And they'll know we are Christians by our love."

And into the middle of our petty bickering and our trivial peace-making comes one who says, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon *me*." That simple word of Jesus is at the same time Judgment and Good News to all of us, whether we take one side or the other in the tug of war for the Spirit, or try to cover up our deep differences with the good Southern Presbyterian strategy of pacifying all sides with the assurance that everybody is right.

Judgment

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.” That is first of all a word of judgment. It means that the Holy Spirit belongs *neither* to the church with its preaching and sacraments, its creeds and confessions, its formal worship services, its 341 Ponce de Leon, and its seminaries; *nor* to individual Christians with their personal religious experiences, their prayer groups, their “praise the Lords” for the peace and joy they have found. The Holy Spirit “belongs” to Jesus Christ and him only. He only “has” the Spirit. It is not the church as such but the Lord of the church, not those who love the Lord but the Lord whom they love, on whom the Spirit rests.

That means that if we want the assurance of the Spirit’s presence *in our own lives*, we cannot analyze our little or great Christian experiences or the little or great achievements of the church. Self-analysis only proves how little of the Spirit we have and how much we need to receive. If there is any assurance of what the Spirit can do or is doing in our lives, it cannot come from our confidence in our personal or corporate spirituality (which is always partial, fleeting, and questionable); it can only come from our confidence in him on the whom the Spirit rests completely, always, without qualification or reservation.

If we want to bear *witness to others* of the life-giving, renewing work of the Spirit, we cannot advertize either our individual lives or the life of the church. Self-advertisement can only lead others to doubt—or maybe laugh at—our claims about the life-giving, renewing work of the Spirit. The only convincing witness is the proclamation, not of us Christians and our church, but of him who alone has the right to say, “Look! *here* is where the Spirit dwells.”

Who has the Spirit? Only Jesus. Not us. We cannot tell ourselves, and we cannot boast to others that *we* are Spirit-filled people. In the presence of the one who alone is Spirit-filled, we can only confess to ourselves and admit to others how spiritually impoverished, how desperately needy we too are, we *Christians*, despite all our personal religious experience and despite even the very best the church is.

Good News

But judgment is never the last word in scripture. The last word is always Good News—Good News hidden even in the most terrible judgments. And so it is also with this saying of Jesus.

And this is the Good News: we do not have to get involved in the self-defeating arguments about which Christians are more Spirit-filled, and therefore better, than other Christians. We don’t have to start out on those arrogant, ridiculous, sure-to-fail arguments about what we Christians and our church have that others do not have, and thus how much richer and better we are than non-Christians. We don’t have to make any claims about ourselves. All we have to do is bear witness in word and in deed to another who can claim that “the Spirit of the Lord is on me.”

And that is not all. The same Jesus who alone *has* the Spirit of the Lord promises to share that Spirit precisely with those who confess themselves to be

and always to remain in themselves spiritually impoverished people who desperately need over and over again to receive his Spirit. He promises to give his Spirit to those who do not and cannot and never will have it as their own private or corporate possession. Because of who he is and what he promises, we who never can say of ourselves that we *have* the Spirit may nevertheless receive the Spirit. We who can never claim that we are Spirit-filled people may nevertheless be filled with the Spirit—not as a possession we can clutch to ourselves but as a gift we may receive and continually receive afresh in the company of the one who is the Spirit-filled person.

II. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE FILLED WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT?

Jesus said, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.” He is the one who is filled with the Holy Spirit. He is *the* one filled with the Spirit, the model and norm of what it means to be filled with the Spirit and thus to be a truly spiritual person. If he does not keep the Spirit to and for himself but shares it with those who live in his company, if we too may receive the Holy Spirit, the Spirit we receive can only be the Spirit which is and always remains his Spirit. So if we want to know what it means for *us* to be filled with the Spirit, we can only look at what happened to *him* when he was filled with the Spirit.

The answer we get is quite different from what we would have expected on the basis of what we usually say about the Spirit. We would have expected to hear Jesus bear witness to the gifts he received when the Spirit of the Lord came upon him: how blessed he was, how much meaning he found in his life, how his worries and anxieties were relieved, how his personal problems were solved, how much love and joy and peace filled his life, how free he was from everything that separated him from God and other people. But instead he speaks, not of various gifts to be enjoyed, but of a task to fulfill. He does not list the benefits he has received but describes a job he has to do. Preach! Proclaim! Heal! Liberate!

What were the *consequences* for him when he set out to fulfill that task? Being filled with the Holy Spirit and thus becoming a “spiritual” person meant friendship with prostitutes, dishonest business men, political revolutionaries, religious heretics, social outcasts. It meant offending the moral and religious leaders of society. It got him into trouble with the government for disturbing the peace and upsetting law and order. And finally, being a spiritual person filled with the Holy Spirit meant being arrested, tried in court, sentenced to capital punishment, and executed as a common criminal.

Now we have to be careful here. If Jesus shares his Spirit with his followers, that does not mean that they become what he was or that they can or should try to do what he did. Christians are not little messiahs or saviors on the world. But those who live in the company of him who was and is the Messiah and Savior, and receive from him the same Spirit which he received, can expect some *correspondence, similarities*, between what being filled with the Spirit meant for him and what it means for them. They can expect in their own way to participate in the task the Spirit anointed him to fulfill, and they can expect also to share the consequences.

So: we must be careful if we pray that we will be filled with the Holy Spirit. Our prayer might be answered! The presence of the Spirit hurts. It does not mean first of all a lot of gifts and benefits to be enjoyed; it means a very dangerous job to do. It does not pay off; it costs. It does not solve all our problems; it gives us new and more difficult problems than we ever imagined. It does not give us everything we want; it demands everything we have. The Holy Spirit does not help us escape from the dirty, ugly, sinful world into the happiness, joy, and peace of another higher, purer world; he sends us into this world with all its sin and suffering and need. He does not let us settle down in the pleasant company of other people who love the Lord; he sends us to befriend people who are immoral, irreligious, and threatening to the economic security and political stability of our society. In short, being filled with the Holy Spirit means risking the consequences of following the one who, just because he was a truly spiritual person, was despised and rejected—despised and rejected, not first of all by the godless sinners and powerless outsiders (they were his friends), but by the God-fearing, law-abiding, powerful insiders.

So take warning: if *that* is what it means, are any of us sure that we really *want* to be filled with the Holy Spirit? Do we really want to be truly spiritual people? Or is what we really want only a little theological orthodoxy, moral superiority, and self-serving piety—precisely the kind of spirituality that could not tolerate the one who was filled with the Holy Spirit?

Now of course we would not understand what being filled with the Spirit meant for Jesus himself and what it means for those with whom he shares his Spirit if that were all we said. Talk about a difficult task and warning about its dangerous consequences is not the last word but only the next-to-the-last word about what the Spirit did in and through Jesus and what he does in and through those who live in the company of Jesus. The last word in this particular passage of scripture, as in all of scripture, is a word not about a great *task* but about a great *gift*, not a word of *warning* but a word of *promise*. But we will not be willing or able to hear the great last word if we are not willing first to hear in all its seriousness the next-to-the-last word. If we want to know what it means to be filled with the Holy Spirit, we must think first of all, not of all kinds of gifts and benefits, but precisely of a dangerous task.

For listen: this is what the Holy Spirit is up to and where he is to be found and experienced:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has annointed me to preach good news to poor people. He has sent me to proclaim release to captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed—in short, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord (that is, the coming of the justice of the Kingdom of God for the weak and powerless, excluded and exploited).*

If we are not willing to look for and experience the presence and work of the Spirit where that is going on, we never will learn what it means to be filled with the Spirit. On the other hand, if we are willing, then we will also discover something else: the hard task the Spirit gives those to whom he comes is *itself* his great gift, the greatest gift of all, far better than all the little gifts we usually dream of when we talk about receiving the Holy Spirit and his “benefits.”

III. WHAT DOES THE HOLY SPIRIT DO?

Jesus said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me" because he has given me a great task—a mission—to fulfill. And what is his mission as one on whom the Spirit has come? Or to put it the other way around, what is it that the Spirit is going to do in and through this one on whom he rests and in whom he dwells?

We would have expected some *religious* talk from Jesus in answer to this question—talk about sin and repentance, conversion and faith, sanctification and salvation. And of course in other places in the New Testament we do hear such talk. But in this, Luke reports Jesus himself summarizing everything the Spirit sent him to do by talking, not about religious issues and problems, but about economics and politics. Not a word is said about lost sinners who need their souls saved or unbelievers who need to be converted. The only people Jesus mentions as those to and for whom he has been sent as a Spirit-filled person are the poor, enslaved, physically handicapped, and oppressed—people who need their *bodily, political, and financial* needs met.

Our first inclination is probably to spiritualize the text and interpret it to mean that Jesus was talking about people who are "spiritually" poor and blind, captives of unbelief, and oppressed by their sinfulness. There is some truth in this line of thought, and it is in fact developed in other places in the New Testament. But that kind of spiritualizing is blocked here by the fact that Jesus is quoting the words of Isaiah which unmistakably and inescapably speak about *social justice*.

Of course it is the justice of the Kingdom of God he is talking about. But that is just the point. The Kingdom of God is not an other-worldly Kingdom but the rule of God's justice breaking into this world, the creation of a new heaven and a new earth.

So there's no escaping what the text plainly says: the Spirit of God is present and at work, and is to be found and experienced, not first of all in the religious sphere, but in the political-economic sphere. True spirituality is expressed, not first of all in religious thoughts and acts and experiences, but in activity aimed at social justice for those who are weak, threatened, excluded, and exploited.

Now once again, of course that is not everything to be said about the mission of Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit. Of course the justice of the Kingdom of God involves forgiving and overcoming sin, faith, repentance, new birth, sanctification, eternal salvation. But we dare not hurry on too fast past the political-social-economic implications of Jesus' saying to more orthodox (and more comfortable) ground. If we do not take seriously what is said here in all its one-sidedness, everything else we can and must say would only prove to be not more but less. If we are going to insist on reading the Bible as the literal Word of God anywhere, we have to read it literally here.

What if we did?

Thanksgiving

We would be very sour and mean-spirited Christians if our first response were not to give thanks and praise the Lord. Good news for poor people! Release

to captives! Sight to the blind! Freedom for the oppressed! And all that not just as a beautiful dream in the heads of a few liberal do-gooders or a terrible threat from some radical revolutionaries, but as the cause which the Lord himself has taken up, poured out his mighty Spirit to set in motion, and sent his Son filled with the Spirit to accomplish.

However staggering may seem the problem of hunger and poverty; however powerful the forces of injustice and oppression in South Africa and in Israel and Jordan—and in the USA; however few and weak the forces of those who care; however cowardly and unwilling those who should care but don't; however frightening the dwindling sources of energy and the consequent concentration of power in the hands of fewer and fewer industrial and political leaders—*the justice of the Kingdom of God on earth is going to prevail!*

How can we be so sure? Because the mighty power of the Holy Spirit has been let loose in the world. Because by the sovereign power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ was conceived and born to “scatter the proud in the imagination of their hearts, put the mighty down from their thrones, exalt those of low degree and fill the hungry with good things.” Because by the sovereign power of the Holy Spirit not just anybody but Jesus Christ himself took up the cause of the poor and captive and blind and oppressed. Because by the sovereign power of the same Holy Spirit he was raised from the dead and designated Son of God in power over all the authorities and principalities and powers that resist the rule of God in the world. Because, in short, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit which happened in Jesus, and through him continues to happen, means not just comfort and joy and peace for individual Christians, or the upbuilding of the church, but politics and economics—the dawning and absolutely sure victory of the justice of the Kingdom of God on earth.

Confession of Sin

But if that is so and we do take it seriously, as soon as we have given thanks and praised the Lord for the outpouring of his mighty Spirit, we have in the very next breath to confess once again what unspiritual people we are. All of us (at least all of us white, affluent American Christians): conservatives and liberals; those of us who are proud of our piety and those of us who are proud of our lack of piety; those of us who are so preoccupied with our own spiritual needs and blessings that we have no time for the poor and oppressed; and those of us who feel superior to those self-righteous pietists because we have a “social conscience,” talk a good game, get angry, feel guilty, maybe even cry a little when we look at all that poverty and suffering and oppression, but don't do anything.

Even if we give to the church or United Appeal or Care, or try to live a simple life-style, or participate in some worthy social service projects, simply by virtue of the fact that we are white Americans, we are a part of a society whose greedy consumption of food and natural resources, whose lust for comfort and profit, deprives millions of people of what they need just to survive. Deliberately or not, we *ourselves* are the oppressors from whom the oppressed need to be freed.

If the Holy Spirit is at work where the struggle for the justice of the Kingdom of God is going on and will be won, it is to a great extent without our

cooperation, despite our passive or active resistance.

We are an unspiritual people, and we dwell in the midst of an unspiritual people.

Invitation and Promise

Finally, these words of Jesus imply a gracious invitation to us unspiritual people to become truly spiritual and the promise that we not only can but will be filled with the same Spirit that rested upon him.

I confess that when I look at the world in which we live, and at the church, and at us Christians, it is hard for me to say what has to be said now. It seems so improbable, so inconceivable—so impossible. But it has to be said and can be said nevertheless: the same Jesus (the same Lukan Jesus) who said at the beginning of his ministry (on his way to the cross), “The Spirit of the Lord is upon *me*,” also said at end of his ministry (after his resurrection), “*You* shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon *you*, and *you* shall be *my* witnesses . . . to the end of the earth.”

Very quickly, three pieces of good news wrapped up in that promise:

1. When the Holy Spirit has come upon you, you shall be *my witnesses—witnesses to Christ*. Thank God we don’t have to get involved in the disastrous enterprise of bearing witness to ourselves or to the church, and what the Spirit has done for us and given to us, and how great we are. We can be witnesses to the one who, filled with the Spirit, really is at work bringing about the justice of the Kingdom of God in the world.

2. *Only witnesses*. Not substitutes for him who are impowered to do what he does, or who have the terrible burden of having to do what he does. Just witnesses, invited to the modest task of participating in the mission he began long before we ever came along, the mission he even now is fulfilling and will complete with or without our feeble, blundering efforts to help. Witnesses who therefore can throw ourselves into the battle with confidence and hope just because its outcome does not depend on us.

3. You shall receive *power*—not just power to become impressive religious personalities, but something much greater than that—power to be and do and say what is necessary to fulfill the task the Spirit gives us to fulfill. For at the same time the Spirit gives us our mission, he also promises the ability to fulfill it. He gives what he demands. We can count on it.

What specifically we will do and how we will go about being such witnesses when the power of the Holy Spirit comes upon us and our church, I honestly don’t know—not even for myself, much less for anyone else. Maybe we don’t need to know. Maybe it’s enough if we will just listen to the good news we have been told, believe it, and set out seriously to learn what it means for us as individuals and for the church.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon *me* because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to bring the justice of the Kingdom of God on earth. . . . And *you* shall receive power when the Holy Spirit (the *same* Spirit) has come upon *you*, and *you* shall be *my* witnesses . . . to the end of the earth.