

A Five-finger Exercise: Meditation and Memories on the Holy Spirit

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Our son-in-law Craig is a fine physician, a devoted husband and father, and a very bright graduate of Duke and Chapel Hill. But—like any of us—he does suffer occasional mental lapses!

Three years ago he was playing a pick-up game of basketball with his son and a friend. He forgot his age, thought he was about twenty again, and went all out. A hard pass hit and bent a finger, but he refused to stop, determined to show these young bucks he could play through the pain. So he kept on—until he tore the ACL in his knee!

At first it seemed the ACL injury was the more serious. But then he found out he had actually broken the middle finger on his surgical hand. Craig is an ob/gyn doctor, and if he couldn't regain full use of his surgical hand, he would never again be able to do surgery or deliver babies.

The knee surgery went well, and an experienced hand surgeon repaired the finger. But the really worrisome result was that the end of his finger still had limited flexibility. With intensive therapy across the months, he did regain the use of that finger and could practice again. But I don't think until then I had fully realized the importance of our fingers.

As I write, I stop and gaze at the fingers on both hands and think how many things I do with them each day by habit. I type, eat, brush my teeth, *hold my wife's hand*, paint from time to time, open doors, start the car, hold the steering wheel—all without thinking. (Take a moment now to pause in your reading to look at each finger—and say thanks!)

How striking then that Jesus used the “finger” as a metaphor to describe the Spirit of God. When he drove a demon out of a deaf-mute man, Luke records, the serious religious leaders accused him of doing so by Beelzebul, the ruler of demons. Jesus retorted, “If I cast out evil by evil then evil is a house divided against itself.... But if it is by *the finger of God* that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you” (Luke 12:20). In the parallel passage in Matthew, Jesus says he drove out this demon by *the Spirit of God* (Matthew 12:25). Clearly *the Spirit of God* is in some sense also *the finger of God*—a vivid image of God's kingdom at work through Jesus—and the Holy Spirit.

Thomas Merton saw Christ as “not simply the tip of the little finger of the Godhead, moving in the world, easily withdrawn.... God has acted and given Himself totally, without division, in the Incarnation. He has become not only one of us but even our very selves.”¹

Just as Jesus was the personal appearance of the Godhead in the flesh, so the Spirit is the personal appearance of Jesus in our flesh—in the body of Christ in this world. This is why I wince whenever someone speaks of the Spirit as “it.” The Holy Spirit is not an “it,” some vague vapor, a kind of spiritual influence or energy. He is, Jesus said, “another Advocate” whom the Father would send, one as real as Jesus

himself, the living, teaching, guiding, spiritually breathing presence of God with God's people. So the apostles can also speak and write of the "love" of the Spirit, the "mind" of the Spirit, the "guiding" of the Spirit, the "comfort" of the Spirit—all personal attributes.

Luke begins his second book with a reminder that in his first one, he wrote of "all that Jesus did and taught," implying that now he records Jesus *continues* to do and teach. So the title should really not be *The Acts of the Apostles*, but *The Acts of the Risen Christ by the Holy Spirit through the Apostles*.

Remembering the exercise my first piano teacher gave me, I picture the acts of the Holy Spirit as a "five-finger exercise" in which the Spirit

Beckons
Points
Writes
Grips
Works

We beckon with our fingers – and so does the Spirit

"The Spirit and the bride say 'Come'" (Revelation 22:17)

I take a walk with my dog Wrangler—a very alert and attentive companion—who watches carefully for my signals. I hold out my hand; he holds up his ears. I beckon with my fingers; he comes close to me. And I wonder, am I as attentive to God as Wrangler is to me?

Throughout the story of Acts, we see the Spirit beckoning, creating a sense of need, conveying the truth about Jesus, turning people to God one-by-one or in groups, empowering these new converts to lead new lives. He makes the gospel call clear and compelling—what we learned in theology as "effectual calling." So Peter preaches on Pentecost, the Spirit pricks the hearts of people, and they respond: "What shall we do?" As the old-time evangelist Moody put it, "Peter lifted up Jesus and the Holy Spirit said, 'Amen!'" Later we see the Holy Spirit – pictured as "the Lord's hand" – turning a great number of people to God (Acts 11:21).

God's finger continues to beckon through the centuries. Who called to Augustine in the garden, telling him to "take and read" the words of Paul, but the Spirit? Who touched the aspiring young novelist Frederick Buechner with words of a George Buttrick sermon: "Are you going home for Christmas"—and birthed in him a longing to come home to the cradle where Christ was laid? How did George Herbert's great poem "Love Bade Me Welcome" bring Christ to possess a non-practicing French Jewish woman Simone Weil, who would have such a powerful influence on her secular country?

I don't have to go so far back or away to recall that beckoning finger myself. My adoptive mother was very devout and very troubled. When I was fourteen, she left our home and virtually disappeared for months. That summer, at a small Christian conference, I heard the speaker describe how he began each day: walking, reading a Psalm, praying out loud. Through his words the Spirit spoke to me. I went to the woods early next morning, following his practice. In the words of Scripture, God's presence became real to a lonely young heart. Out of that experience I sensed the call to share what I had found and to preach as an evangelist.

When I graduated from Columbia Seminary, I was considering a call to a church in Missouri. But Billy Graham (and his sister!) had come into my life, and he invited me to join his team for a stint. We were part of some of his early “crusades” in Scotland, Canada, New York, and Australia. Tremendous crowds packed stadiums. The events were fairly well organized. But what I most remember is the sense of utter dependence, not on organization and publicity, but on prayer; it was more the rising of a new spiritual wind.

I still remember the figure of Billy Graham prostrate on a floor in prayer, pleading for the Spirit to move people. Seeing him *prone* felt strange to this reserved Canadian Presbyterian. But it was not a show. It was a heart-felt cry for the finger of the Spirit to beckon people toward Christ.

And I wonder now, in the slow attrition of our mainline churches and the growth of the “nones” among youth, might the Spirit be beckoning us to heed again that love that first bade us welcome, to a deep and passionate longing for the Spirit to breathe through our preaching and our busy activities and create a holy dissatisfaction, a fresh breath of God?

I have been moved by the recent personal account of Christian Wiman, editor of the esteemed *Poetry* magazine. Raised in a Southern Baptist culture, his faith dissolved in the larger and secular world of college. Then, at age thirty-nine, after three years of a writing drought, he fell in love, was married, then eight months later was diagnosed with incurable cancer. He and his wife wandered into a church, he began to write again, and as he recounts, was “finally able to assent to the faith that had long been latent within me.”

Wiman’s desire now is to have a conversation with “an enormous contingent of people out there” who are starved for ways of feeling and articulating their experiences with God. And while *what* we believe matters, he has come to realize the real question is *how*. “How do you answer the burn of being that drives you both deeper into and utterly out of yourself? What might it mean for your life, and for your death, to acknowledge the insistent, persistent call of God?”² The “*burn of being*.” Could there be a much better description of that fiery finger that beckons?

We point with our fingers – and so does the Holy Spirit

“Being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went...” (Acts 13:4).

I know it’s not polite to point—my mother told me so. But I also know that pointing is sometimes very important when we need direction. In recent years my own ministry has been focused on spiritual mentoring with those in ministry leadership, what is traditionally described as “spiritual direction.” My wife does not like the term “spiritual director” because the first person she knew who called herself a “spiritual director” was more like a spiritual dictator! But the practice, the “art” of spiritual direction, is not about telling someone what they are to do or where they are to go. Rather it is the art of “holy listening,” listening together for the voice of God’s Spirit. Out of these times of listening to the Word and to each other, we may sense something that has been missed, may point someone (or be pointed) in a certain direction, asking, “I wonder if God may be calling you to pay attention in a deeper way to some opportunity, some need, to the voice of your own calling?”

Jesus promised that the Spirit would both remind his followers of his words and also guide them into all truth. He would be—at the point!

This pointing finger of God comes again and again in the books of Acts. The Spirit points Philip to the Ethiopian treasurer reading Isaiah and wondering who the prophet writes about (Acts 8). He points Ananias to Saul, his ex-enemy, now one of God's chosen (Acts 9). In Acts 10 he points Peter to Cornelius, a God-seeking Roman soldier. In Acts 13 he moves Paul and his missionary companions to cross the cultural barrier and carry the gospel to the nations.

It was John Wesley I believe who said that "we should second the motions of the Holy Spirit." When the Spirit says "I move," our response should be to second that motion. Where is God working? What doors is the Spirit opening? Where do we find responsive people? Or, where does he point us to a hard place and say, "Stay here. I am not through yet."

But what about *planning*? How does our planning relate to the Spirit's pointing? Reflect on the pattern of Acts as a response to God's initiative. God is in charge, and the grand strategy is all his. He is the door-opener and the door-closer. Whenever a closed door is suddenly flung open, the early Christians become a rapid response force. When the Spirit says pause, they wait. When the way is made clear, they use whatever tactics would be effective to tell the Story of God to the world.

Perhaps we in the main-line churches, with ageing and declining memberships, can listen even more humbly to our ministry fellows in other groups – in the best of the "seeker churches" and "house churches" and the immigrant congregations, to those in the Global South where the church grows even under intense persecution. Perhaps from them we will find some "pointers" of the Spirit. Can we also pay closer attention when the Spirit points us to seekers nearby?

A personal encounter stays with me. In Manchester, England, Billy Graham was preaching to a capacity crowd in a huge stadium. Outside was a large jumbo screen where others could watch. I was asked to speak to them briefly with a word of welcome and invite them to listen and respond. As I walked back toward the stadium, a well-dressed man approached me. He hadn't heard my remarks but obviously thought I was part of the Graham group. "Has Billy Graham written anything for bereaved parents?" he asked. "My twenty-year-old daughter died a year ago, and I do not know where to turn. I need help." Startled by the "coincidence," I said, "I think I understand. I lost a twenty-one-year-old son." We stood and talked a long time. His name was Gerald, and he was a dentist in the city. I introduced myself and told him of our son, of our ongoing sense of loss, and what our faith in Christ had meant to us. I offered a brief prayer, and we parted. As I walked back to the stadium, it suddenly came to me: why had I not invited him to come in with me? Although he wandered off in the crowds, I spotted him. "Gerald, would you like to go in with me? And if you want to open your life to Christ, I will be glad to stand with you." He did so want. We went in together. And at the call, he and I stood with others in commitment.

A year later at an anniversary celebration for the crusade volunteers, the chairman, to whom I had told of my encounter, recounted that story. Three women came up after and asked, "Bishop, could that have been Gerald Kettle you told about?" "That's right," he said, "Why?"

"Because," said one, "we were part of a prayer group before the crusade. We prayed for friends who were going through difficult times, that God might touch them with Billy's message. And Gerald was one we prayed for especially."

What made Gerald Kettle approach me out of that crowd, knowing neither who

I was nor that I had also lost a child? What prompted me to go and find him after we parted? And who led those friends to pray so fervently for him? What... who...if not the pointing finger of the Spirit?

We write with our fingers...and so does the Spirit

"You are a letter of Christ...written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God" (2 Corinthians 3:3).

My own writing is pretty much a scrawl. Often I can hardly read it myself. It may be that as a left-hander, I learned to write upside down. Even more likely it says, "Whoever wrote this is in too much of a hurry. Slow down...and get clear!" Which makes me wonder: is Christ clearly reflected in my busy life?

We have many programs of evangelism. But the most effective evangelism grows out of who we are in Christ. How does the Spirit deprogram our witnessing? Make us more authentic storytellers? By writing God's Story – into our lives.

God used his finger to write his personality into the stars, said the Psalmist: "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers..." And on the mountain Moses received God's law written on tablets of stone. But what amazing writing God the Spirit does in writing Christ into our lives. As Paul wrote to the disciples at Corinth (whose former lives were anything but Christ-like), "You are a letter from Christ... written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts" (2 Corinthians 3:3). And what does the Spirit write but the *love* of Jesus, the *joy* of Jesus, and the *authenticity* of Jesus upon our lives? Witnessing then does not mean putting on a spiritual front. It means being honest about who we are – and (as the Quaker Douglas Steere said) "whose we are."

Paul (remembering Moses' face shining after he was with God) develops this "writing" image: "And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Note Paul's certainty: "*all of us ... are being transformed.*" Really? How often does my face shine? On dark days and in troubled times? But this is not a self-conscious glory, a kind of spiritual smiley-face. The image is of Christ; the transforming agent is the Spirit; the glory is when others see Christ even through our wrinkles and wounds.

My friend Canon Andrew White serves as rector of St. George's church in the heart of Baghdad. In spite of multiple sclerosis, he has gone back and forth from England multiple times. The church has been bombed, members kidnapped, yet the church goes on. Andrew tells of a visit by Lord Hylton, chairman of their board. The children welcome him like a long lost friend. The service begins in Arabic "Allah hu maana"--"The Lord is here." The people shout the response: "His Spirit is with us." There are not enough seats, so they stand for hours. They come not just to worship, but to get food, clothes, blankets, to meet their friends. A free dental and medical clinic treats vast numbers, most of whom are not Christians. One of the children says, "I learned that Jesus was everything, and he would provide our needs, and he has made me happy again." When Lord Hylton returns to London he writes: "*I have been to the church of the future.*"

In Baghdad! In probably the most dangerous street in the world, the church of the

future! This, says Andrew White, is what church is really about. Not denominations or labels, but about the Church Universal. The one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church everywhere, even in the most dangerous place in the world, serving and showing the love of Jesus. Here, in the streets of Baghdad, the finger of God is writing the likeness of Jesus.

We grip with our fingers...and so does the Spirit

“The Spirit helps us in our weakness” (Romans 8:26).

Backsliding is not usually a major worry for Presbyterians. (As the saying goes, Methodists believe in backsliding. Presbyterians don’t. We just practice it!) Perhaps what *might* intrigue us is the thought of “*falling upward*”—the paradoxical title of a recent book by Richard Rohr on a spirituality for the “two halves of life.” Rohr suggests that while early voices give us direction and identity and keep us safe and going for many years, we may become so used to them that we end up not able to hear the real voice of God. Rohr writes, “There is a deeper voice of God, which you must learn to hear and obey in the second half of life. It will sound an awful lot like the voices of risk, of trust, of surrender...of an intimate stranger, of your deepest self.... The true faith journey only begins at this point.”³

To follow on this “second journey,” we need the gripping finger of the Spirit as much or even more than in the first part of our life’s course. And the good news of the “gripping” finger is that God will not let us go until his work in us is finished.

Our belief in the “perseverance of the saints” is really more about the persistence of God our Savior isn’t it? The Father is determined that the image of the Son will be formed in us (Romans 8:28). The Shepherd-Son promises to give his sheep eternal life and that “no one will snatch them out of my hand” (John 10:28). And the Spirit is the down-payment of our legacy of redemption (Ephesians 1:13,14). The changes redemption brings are sure, but often slow and very often painful. On this journey we need that gripping finger of the Spirit to hold us steady. So Paul reminds his readers that “the sufferings of this present time” are not worth comparing with “the glory which will be revealed...the revealing of the children of God.” And he holds out the promise that while we wait, “the Spirit helps us in our weakness” (Romans 8:18ff).

As life presses in from without and hesitancy makes us cowards within, we have this assurance: we may fall, but we “fall upward”! The Spirit’s gripping finger is in us, prays for us, and will not let us go until we let go with a great “Yes” to God’s best for our life. “Be filled with the Spirit,” writes the apostle (Ephesians 5:18). The Spirit is a gift to receive. And that fullness will mean the Spirit filling every part of who God has made us to be.

Back to our son-in-law Craig. After his finger healed, he went back to surgery and delivering babies. Then came another blow. On a summer night last year, he was taken to emergency with symptoms that looked like a stroke. How could this be – at fifty-five? As it turned out there was no stroke, but bleeding in a tiny portion of his brain that caused seizures. For some weeks he was out of work and *not* driving, but then with medication, he has recovered and is doing what he most loves: seeing and talking with patients.

Craig’s parents were Presbyterian missionaries in Brazil, where his mother died when he was two. Craig carries within him that same missionary, ministering spirit. “As a doctor, I am a minister in disguise,” he likes to say. He prays over new babies

and more than once with a dying person in hospital. Over lunch, after his “fall,” he tells me, “I am more rested than in years, without night call,” then adds, “and what I most want is to help other men know what they are missing if they are missing Jesus.” Craig has fallen—upward!

While Craig’s missionary mother is buried in Brazil, there is a grave marker for her in Swannanoa, not far from the long-time Montreat home of another Presbyterian missionary kid—Ruth Graham—Craig’s aunt by marriage. Ruth’s burial place is at the Billy Graham Library in Charlotte. I think that Ruth must have had the “gripping finger” of the Spirit in mind when on her stone she had chiseled these words:

Construction Complete
Thanks for Your Patience

We work with our fingers—and so does the Spirit

“Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Corinthians 3:17).

And the great work of the Spirit is liberation! Isn’t that how Jesus told of his mission in his own inaugural address in his synagogue in Nazareth?

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captive and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. (*Luke 4:18-19*)

To set the captives free—from every kind of oppression and captivity that bind—the demons of sin, of addiction, of hatred and violence, of snobbery and exclusiveness, of pride and prejudice—that is the mission of the Lord, and that is the work of the Spirit within us. And in that miraculous arc of the kingdom come and coming Jesus keeps doing through us what he did on that long ago day when he cast the evil spirit out of that mute and deaf fellow, and when accused of siding with the devil said: “If it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you.”

Pentecost in Winter

It is winter as I write this meditation about the Spirit; a melancholy sometimes sets in with the dismal darkness of mid-winter. Perhaps that’s simply my seasonal affective disorder. But it may also be anxiety that sets in with the economic suffering, the political gamesmanship, the shootings and killings here and abroad. It may be the passing on of old friends. It may be that like Wendell Berry, I wake at night in despair of what the world will be for our grandchildren and two little great-ones.

In any case I need to pray now: *veni Spiritus!* Don’t wait until spring! And then comes to me Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poem about our world—both beautiful and bent. “The world is charged with the grandeur of God,” he exults, then asks, “Why then do men not reckon his rod?” Generations have “trod and trod” until this earth is “seared with trade, bleared, smeared with toil” and worn down to a bareness. For all this, he knows there lives a “freshness deep down things” so,

Though the last lights off the black West went

Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs –
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods, with warm breast and with Ah! bright wings.⁴

So now I lift my prayer again:

Come, Spirit of God.
As you brooded over the first creation,
and in Mary's womb breathed the new creation in Christ,
breathe a fresh springtime into our hearts.
Beckon us
Point us
Write in us
Grip us
Work through us.
Amen.

An After-note

Any metaphor can be stretched too far. Obviously we do many more things with our hands than listed, and the Holy Spirit gestures in many more ways than suggested. And there is a mystery about the ways of the Spirit. "The wind blows where it chooses," said Jesus, of the Spirit. We cannot control him. So how do we interpret his gestures—his beckonings, pointings, writings? He is not controllable, but he is predictable in that he comes from the Father and Son, he speaks of the Son, he reminds us of the Son. The sure marks of his presence are the fruit of Christ-likeness in our lives. Absent those we need to "test the spirits" wisely.

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, Letter to Dom Jean Leclercq, *The School of Charity. The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, ed. Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1997), 85.
2. Christian Wiman, "God Between the Lines," *Christianity Today*, January/February 2013.
3. Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 46, 48.
4. Gerard Manley Hopkins, "God's Grandeur," *Sound and Sense*, 8th ed., ed. Laurence Perrine and Thomas R. Arp (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1984), 167.