

**© Protected by Common Law Copyright.**  
**This may be copied for personal use only.**

## **Ignoring the Holy Spirit**

*By William P. Wilson, M.D.*

I subscribe to only two Christian periodicals. Both are orthodox in their theology, but intended for two different audiences. *Christianity Today* is not written with a surfeit of theological jargon. It is written with a decidedly reformed evangelical point of view. *First Things* is a journal that leans strongly toward Catholicism, but does have a liberal sprinkling of articles that address the issues that are of common interests to Evangelicals and Catholics. The thing that stands out though is that there is scant mention of the Holy Spirit in either of these respected journals.

I have often wondered why the mainline and some of the evangelical churches have neglected or rejected the work and person and especially the gifts of the Holy Spirit. I have pondered this omission and think that the answer lies in the demotion of the priesthood of all believers, and the separation of the church into priests (ministers) and laity. In the beginning the priests saw themselves as the shepherds (which is a biblical concept) and the laity as sheep who were unable to access the mysteries of the faith. As a matter of fact, in the Catholic church they were not allowed to have direct access. Services were conducted in Latin and there were no Bibles in the language of the people. Thus all interpretations of faith came through the clergy. It was clear then that what Luther and other reformers remonstrated against was not only the perverse sale of indulgences that were intended to buy a person out of purgatory, but he also believed the work of the Holy Spirit was inhibited in the believer by their inability to encounter God in his Word. Jesus said that the Holy Spirit would teach believers about himself. The Bible is the account of Jesus' life and work. The Holy Spirit illuminated the Word to reveal Jesus. Our Lord provided us an example of how this occurs when he demonstrated to the disciples on the road to Emmaus how the scriptures foretold his coming and his death and resurrection. The New Testament scriptures also tell of his birth, death and resurrection as well as the coming of the promised Holy Spirit making all believers priests. It was not Jesus' intention to continue the priestly tradition in his followers. He was scathing in his denunciation of their behavior. Instead he told us that we can go directly to the Father. We do not have to have an intercessor. In Hebrews we are told that we do have a priest in Jesus who is interceding for us. We only need Jesus, our high priest, because we are a priesthood of believers (1 Peter 2:9).

Martin Luther changed the authoritarian stranglehold that the priesthood had on the church. He translated the Bible into the language of the people and reestablished the priesthood of believers. In his actions he abolished the

theocracy of the Catholic church and established a democratic church with Christ as the head. As anyone would expect, his actions did not set well with the established church. It tried to regain control, but was unable to do so in those areas where they lost dominion. In other parts of their areas of hegemony, they tightened up their control. Thus the Catholic church remained authoritarian and not authoritative.

Another factor that quenched the Holy Spirit in the church was that Christianity had its origin in a world dominated by Greek and Roman thought. In the Greek culture, philosophy was considered the highest form of intellectual activity. It was, therefore, no surprise that theology developed along philosophical lines. Two of the great theologians of the early church, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, wrote in language that was similar to that of Plato, Aristotle and the other philosophers of Greece and Rome. Their writings had to do with ideas and not with feelings. Even though feelings still were experienced in the church, they got little attention.

We can then account for the neglect of the Holy Spirit's role in the church after the turmoil of the fourth century by saying that authoritarianism and intellectualism tended to occlude experientialism. This is true in Christianity because God is love, and when one experiences God he experiences a person who is emotional. This moves the believer to a higher dimension of existence. In a like manner, the Holy Spirit reveals Christ to the person without an intermediate. This negates the authority of the priest and he loses his power. It is apparent that the doctrine of infallibility of the pope is based on the same authoritarianism and intellectualism that one finds in many modern day mainline (and some evangelical) churches.

Then, too, many of the mainline churches have maintained an episcopal governance. The bishop in the Episcopal and Methodist churches maintains authoritarian control over ministers directly or through underlings. No one except an ordained minister can serve the Eucharist, and one can only be ordained an elder if he/she has been to an approved seminary. Baptist churches also maintain control through their convention and associations. Other churches have a hierarchy. Although these church governing bodies are democratic in form, the Holy Spirit plays little role in decision making. Parties and groups exert authoritarian control.

Authoritarianism has reared its ugly head even in the present day Holy Spirit movement. Some years ago there was the development of a heresy called "shepherding." In this heresy every one was to be "under" a shepherd. A group of leaders were the chief shepherds. Next the minister of the church was the local head shepherd, then at the next level were the elders and below them the small group leaders. All decisions about work, finances, relationships and religious life had to be submitted to the shepherd for approval who sought further

approval if necessary from those higher up the chain of command. The believer was expected to obey the shepherd's decisions on threat of excommunication. This movement resulted in profoundly traumatic experiences in many members of these congregations. Needless to say, shepherding died a quick death because it was not of the Lord. Jesus said he came to free us, not to keep us in bondage.

Interestingly, a milder form of this heresy has reoccurred in the Apostles and Prophets movement. Any number of successful pastors have designated themselves as apostles. The head apostle is a renowned theologian. Although he does not call himself the head, he acts as if he is the leader and prime authority on apostleship. There are a small number of pastors who have appointed themselves as apostles to a group of churches. I do not know for certain if they try to exert authoritarian control over these churches, but they talk as if they do.

Is authoritarian control necessary? In some cases it is. The church cannot tolerate heresy and apostasy. But because heretics and apostates gain control through authoritarian structures, heresy and apostasy rear their ugly heads. Examples of this are found in the appointment of a homosexual bishop in the Episcopal church and in the Reimagining Conference, sponsored by an interdenominational women's group. Sadly the structure of mainline churches allows no remedy. Even though the laity in the church remonstrate, they are helpless since they have been deprived of their power by the governmental structure of the church.

As I write this I have a strong feeling that many will believe that I am a spiritual anarchist. I am not! I believe that the church should be guided and directed by the Holy Spirit. In two thirds of the world the church is consistently guided by the Holy Spirit today. To a lesser extent the Spirit guides the church in the US and minimally so in Europe. The primary spiritual force in Europe is Islam where the immigration of a huge body of Muslims are creating major problems.

I have to admit that I have wanted to see the church renewed by the power of the Holy Spirit, but alas it has not happened. I must also admit that here and there one can find renewal, but it is not widespread. Can it be that our quenching the Holy Spirit by ignoring him is the reason that there is no renewal?

The heart of Christianity is found in Colossians 1:27 where Paul summed it up in his statement, "Christ in you the hope of Glory." What did he mean by this? To understand that statement we have to go back to John 14 where Jesus, in making the promise of the Holy Spirit, made it clear that he and the father would (as the Holy Spirit) come and live with us and in us. This supernatural installation gives us the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:16). Why is it then that people reject

a relationship with God and the guidance of the Holy Spirit? The answer lies in a statement by Delafield Smith, a Christian lawyer, who said that the human will does not tolerate the imposition of another will above its own. It only responds to an appeal to the will. No one likes to be dominated and controlled. by another. In all intimate human relationships there is a voluntary submission to one another. Paul knew this when he told us in Ephesians 5:21 to submit ourselves to one another. God, therefore, does not command us to relate to him— he appeals to us. This is best summed up in Paul's statement in 2 Corinthians 5:20 where he says that as God's ambassadors we appeal to others to be reconciled to God. Almost all evangelical pleas in the Bible are cached as appeals.

Recently I offered Christ to a college student whose parents are apparently turned on Christians. He turned me down because he did not think his parents had any fun. He saw their participation in church as work. I have to admit that I could not offer him a substitute for the fun of the world. All Christianity has to offer is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, humility and self control. He does not realize that in rejecting the offer he remains a slave to sin and that the consequences of continuing to sin are fear, anger, pain, sorrow and conflict. I did not try to argue with him, it would have done no good. He has to suffer the consequences of sin and/or the meaninglessness of the "fun life" before he will consider God's offer. I hope his parents are praying for him.

What blocks people from establishing a relationship with God? The answer is to be found in that free will with which we are endowed. God is not a tyrant who demands that we have a relationship with him. Throughout the Bible he makes appeals to his people to love him and then to obey his commandments. In the ten commandments he caches them in absolute terms, but on careful reading of the Old Testament you realize that people have a choice. They can obey God or not. If they choose to be disobedient, they have to accept the consequences. If they obey, they will be rewarded. Thus, sanctions are built into the system and we can choose to suffer them.

In Deuteronomy 30, God appeals to the Israelis to obey his commandments and in the appeal he laid before them, the choice of blessings or curses. His advice is to choose life, i.e. choose the blessings!

Still people do not want to believe the offer. They do not think that Christians have fun, that their lives are spent doing dull things, singing mournful music, listening to dull sermons and being harangued to give money for things that seem unimportant. I have to admit that I do not like those things either. If I look at the life of Jesus, though, I find that he did have fun. He attended weddings, banquets, and other social activities and in general socialized in ways that seemed to me to be fun. There was no depression in his life until the last days, there also was no fear and anger that dragged him down. He did what the Father

wanted him to do and that was to teach his followers what he and God were really about. Being a teacher, I know how he felt. I love to teach and see people change as a result of my teaching. As a physician, I love seeing people get healed. As a Christian witness, I love to see people saved from the horrors of hell. They say ten thousand angels rejoice when one person is saved and so do I. As a husband and father, I love the fact that my children have come to know the Lord and are assured of eternal life. Their accomplishments also bring great joy to my life. Do I have fun? You bet I do.

In the world, though, I see people riddled with guilt and shame. They are angry and sometimes filled with hate. Their lives have no meaning and they cannot escape the fact that they are slaves to sin. They are morally paralyzed. Finally they do not contemplate their death. Everyone is infinitely interested in existing so they deny the afterlife, and assume they will no longer exist after death. Wrong! They instinctively know that there is more beyond life and despair.

How then can we reach these people? It is only when we appeal to their will to change that we can ever hope to reach them. I, as a psychiatrist, have always been in the business of transforming lives. Fifty-six years ago I was without God and I tried healing with Electric Convulsive Therapy or by persuasion. In the former I was successful but with the latter I was a dismal failure, when medications became available, I tried them all. They worked, but they did not cure the problems that people had. Through the years there were major advances in medicine, but they did not solve the existential problems of mankind. Lives were still without meaning, men despaired at their inability to control the sin in their lives, and they could not contemplate death without despairing. Then God acted in my life, and in the process he revealed to me that there was a way to heal the existential problems of life.

I became active in an activity in the United Methodist Church called Lay Witness Missions. Later they were called Faith Alive Missions in the Episcopal church. In these missions we found that people had been healed of all kinds of existential (psychospiritual) problems. We also saw people with their transformed lives acting as agents of transformation in the lives of others. These missions were often opposed by people in the church who were religious but not regenerated. One of my witnesses once remarked that they were starched and ironed, but unwashed. I heard and saw people who had been alcoholics, drug addicts, prostitutes, liars, swindlers and just plain messed up people who had been healed by the action of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

One of these missions was in a little mountain town in Virginia. The local physician had wanted a mission in his little church and the people agreed to it because they loved him. I selected a team of people who had some connections with the mountain culture, but it also contained some people who knew little of

the culture of those people. One of my witnesses brought a guest who was to be an observer. He could not restrain himself to that role, and when I reminded him of his proper role, he lashed out at me in the evaluation session after our first service on Friday night. It was a tension producing session and it cast a pall over the subsequent session. The members of the church participated only in a desultory way. Finally, on Sunday morning we conducted the final service and gave an invitation to make Christ the Lord and Master of their lives. No one stirred! We finished playing the invitation hymn, had lunch and started home. We were so discouraged. We could not determine what had gone wrong. Nothing like this had happened in any prior missions. I prayed about it the next week seeking an explanation and then I got a letter from the pastor who told me that at the church's evaluation session after the mission, one member said that he felt nothing happened because they had the wrong attitude. They had gone through the motions for the sake of their doctor, they did not do it for themselves. They then realized that they needed to repent and did so. The pastor then suggested that they should do what we asked them to do. All who attended that meeting came to the communion rail, knelt and prayed a prayer asking for forgiveness and asking the Lord into their lives. The church was renewed, the doctor was jubilant and the pastor went on to become one of the leading ministers of the conference. In this instance, the Holy Spirit worked in his own way.

On another mission in Zanesville, OH, Satan did his best to break up the meeting. At the suggestion of a coordinator in Ohio, I had invited the lay leader of the East Ohio Conference to be a witness. I had him with me on the first night in our small group. When I asked him to tell about his faith he began to tell the people that he thought lay witness missions were wrong and that they should all go home. His belligerent attitude persisted into the meetings of the next day and it became apparent that I had to ask him to leave. Since he was a large, tall man, I asked some of my male witnesses to be around when I confronted him. When the time came, none of them were there, so I had to trust myself to the protection of the Lord. I did confront him and although he was belligerent, he did leave the building. He hung around the parking lot until evening and then he left for good. On Sunday the people responded very well to the invitation and many got saved.

To illustrate how even highly intellectual persons can be reached in the power of the Spirit, I want to describe a mission in the area of Maryland where the NIH, the National Science Foundation, and the National Bureau of Standards are located. The church was a large Methodist church in Rockville, MD. I was asked to do this mission because of my status as a scientist. The leadership of the church felt I could speak to the large number of scientists in their community. I selected my team to include a number of intellectuals.

I did, though, take Carl as an observer. Carl was blind and had grown up in a poverty stricken dysfunctional home. He could see well enough to drive a car and

get about without a seeing eye dog, but he had never learned in school to read ordinary print. He worked as a transcriptionist in our department, so it was easy for me to counsel him after his salvation. In the process, I gave him a large print Good News Bible. He took it to his Sunday school class and asked them to teach him how to read it. They spent an enormous amount of time and successfully taught him to read it. Since he was to be an observer, I thought Carl would learn how to give his witness, and then I would use him on future missions.

Our mission was going well and we came to Sunday morning. I assigned him to go with a mature witness to the young men's class. I did not tell the leader not to use him, so he asked Carl to witness first. He got up and with assurance told the men, who were mostly young scientists, what God had done in his life. At the end he said that he would now like to read to them from his Bible. Holding the Bible several inches from his eyes, he opened it to the book of Ephesians in the third chapter. He then haltingly read verses 14 to 21. "For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen."

I am not sure if Carl could see them, but the eyes of the men were filled with tears. The Holy Spirit did his work and when we gave the invitation in the 11 o'clock service all these men gave their hearts to God.

Sometimes the Holy Spirit works in the same way for an individual witness. I was asked to go to Auburn, Maine to speak in a lay revival at a Baptist church. The leader took it upon himself to ask the Methodist minister to have me speak in his church on Sunday. After I had done my thing for the Baptists, I visited with the Methodist minister who decided I was OK, so I could speak. I did not know what to preach on, but I trusted the Holy Spirit to give me the subject. When it came time for the service I still did not know. Now this church was kinda high church so they had a processional at the beginning of the service. We lined up to go in and I could see that there was a beautiful ash cross hanging above the white marble communion table on a dias in the front of the church. This reminded me of the scripture where Paul spoke of preaching the cross. Interestingly, I had to learn its meaning the hard way. I once made a comment that I had many crosses to bear. After the service a kindly old retired minister told me that what I was talking about

were burdens and not crosses. As a result I endeavored to find the meaning of the cross.

I first read a book entitled *Jesus and His Cross* written by a Baptist theologian friend of mine named Ed McDowell. This did not satisfy me so I went to the Duke Divinity Library and got all the books I could find on the cross. None of them answered my question. Then I finally turned to praying about it and asked God to reveal the real meaning. One day I was praying while driving home and I suddenly had a vision of a rectangular sign with flames around the edge. In the center was the word "OBEDIENCE." Two weeks later I was reading in the second chapter of Philippians and I came to the statement that Jesus walked the path of obedience to death, his death on the cross. I knew then for sure that the cross meant obedience.

I began my sermon that morning by reading the words to the hymn, Beneath the Cross of Jesus. I then recounted briefly the story of my conversion and how I had to learn the essence of my relationship with God, and how God taught me the meaning of the cross. I told them that I had tried to be obedient long before the meaning of the cross was revealed to me. I finished by saying that the rewards were what God had promised.

I then, in my mind, debated as to whether I would give an invitation. A voice in my head said, "Oh, don't bother. These people are so cold they will not respond." Then another voice said, "Aw, go on you are not coming back up here anyway." I liked the second voice better so I gave an invitation. The organist played the invitation hymn and nothing happened during the first verse. Then as we started to sing the second, a young woman got up and came up to the front. She did not ascend the steps until a young man came up and knelt at the communion rail. Then it seemed that the flood gates opened and in a few moments the communion rail was filled. Then the steps, then the area in front of the steps and then the center aisle. A few just knelt in their pew when all the space was gone.

I looked over at the pastor and noticed that the front of his shirt was wet with tears. Finally we said a benediction and left the church. The pastor had arranged for me to have lunch with some of the members. One of them was the lady who had first come forward. She was the wife of the local obstetrician. In our conversation I asked her why she came forward. She said, "Doctor Wilson, I had waited ten years for that moment, and I was not going to miss it even if no one else came."

I am convinced that most people will come to Christ if the Holy Spirit draws them and a willing worker for the Lord will witness to them. There are some who will



not come. Their hearts are hardened and their ears closed, but they need to hear how God can transform lives and we need to tell them how he transformed ours. We can only do this if we let the Holy Spirit anoint what we do. It is not an intellectual exercise.