

THE POWER AND WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT I

The Work of the Holy Spirit in Conviction and Conversion

J. I. Packer

I live in Vancouver, Canada, where the wind rarely rises beyond a gentle breeze. But in Britain, where I lived before, gales would strip branches from trees, roofs from sheds, and make it hard to stand. The power of a hurricane or tropical typhoon is awesome. Yet, the wind is God's picture of the activity of the person whom Charles Williams rightly and reverently called "our Lord the Holy Spirit."

The biblical words for *Spirit* (*ruach* in Hebrew, *pneuma* in Greek) signify breath breathed or exhaled hard such as when you blow up balloons, blow out candles, or breathe hard as you run. The words also signify the blowing of the wind, which is sometimes barely perceptible, but at other times becomes a roaring, shattering thing—an overwhelming display of power. The Spirit's action takes both forms, and many in between. The Spirit is God's power in human lives.

Eighty years ago, a breath of revival struck the church in Manchuria. Missionaries wrote home these words: "One clause in the Creed that lives before us now in all its inevitable, awful solemnity is, 'I believe in the Holy Ghost.'" I dare to hope and pray that we shall be impacted by that same "inevitable, awful solemnity" at this Congress. Should a "Holy Ghost hurricane" hit us, there will be some disruption—I promise you that—but we, and our ministries, will be blessedly marked for life; not by chaos and darkness such as natural hurricanes bring but by light, order, and Christlikeness.

The man with whom I began as a pastor and another close friend in the ministry for over twenty-five years are both now in glory. They were revival converts. I have never known men of deeper humility and honesty, of greater sensitivity to sin, of a stronger sense of God's holiness, or of shrewder discernment of the human heart. As one who has long coveted these qualities for himself, so I covet them now for us all.

Much is said nowadays about the need for worldwide revival and the renewing ministry of the Holy Spirit. That is good, but care is needed lest this new emphasis goes astray, and its correcting of one error produces a greater error. In my youth, all the talk was about Jesus and far too little was said about the Spirit. It became vogue to call the Spirit "the displaced person of the Godhead" and "the Cinderella of theology." Today, people are being promised an experience of the Spirit in situations where far too little is being said concerning Christ. That can be disastrous. Knowledge of Christ and fellowship with him is what the Holy Spirit's ministry since Pentecost is all about.

The Spirit focuses attention, not on himself, but on the Savior. He has a ministry of illumination through the Word that convinces us of the reality of Christ; a ministry that leads us to see our need of Christ so that we embrace him in faith and love; a ministry that keeps us prayerfully in touch with Christ and assured of salvation by Christ; and a ministry of oneness which connects us to Christ in such a way that his risen life flows into us and he ministers to others through us. The Reformers, Puritans, Pietists, and older evangelicals in the West understood this. They insisted that the only proof of religious experiences came from the Spirit of God. Through those experiences the men, women, and children concerned were being prepared for, and then pointed and led to, fellowship by faith with Christ as their Savior and Lord.

But today any experience of quietness replacing mental distress, hopefulness replacing depression, or behavioral order replacing behavioral chaos tends to be treated as a work of the Holy Spirit, even when no reference to Jesus Christ enters into it. On that basis, one would have to treat the experiences of Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic mystics, and the "altered states" of consciousness promised by North America's New Age movement and sought by many through drugs as saving manifestations of the Holy Spirit. Some people actually do, but biblically this is incorrect. Religious experiences which keep people from seeking and finding Christ are sponsored by a spirit quite different from the Holy Spirit of God.

My focus is the work of the Holy Spirit in the experienced event of personal conviction and conversion. Conversion is a vital necessity. Without conversion, no one beyond the state of infancy who has ordinary mental powers can be saved.

Conversion is a much misunderstood subject. Some think it must be an intense experience, a rush of feeling associated with revivalist campaigns and choirs singing, "Just as I Am," or accompanied by the experience some refer to as being "slain in the Spirit." But some conversions are entirely unemotional.

Conversion involves much more than new feelings, and clarity about conversion is important. There are three issues regarding conversion that I will attempt to clarify: (a) the Spirit as the author of conversion; (b) the work accomplished by the Spirit in conversion; and (c) the means used by the Spirit in conversion.

The Holy Spirit as the Author of Conversion

The word *conversion* means "turning from one thing to another." The concept of Christian conversion, according to the New Testament, is of turning from idolatry and sin to God through Jesus Christ. This turning is analyzed as repentance towards God—which means first a change of thoughts, then a change of ways. It is also analyzed as faith in Jesus Christ—which means a trustful commitment. This repentance and faith is the response that the gospel requires.

But fallen human hearts are gripped by sin. None of us have it in us by nature to take the gospel seriously and turn to God in complete trust. It often looks as though evangelism will always be an impossible task; that no one will ever respond to the Good News. But, thank God, that is not so! Many, in fact, do turn to God and are committed to him. How is this possible?

The New Testament explains it in terms of sinners being *called*. That is, not just told the truth about salvation, but led by God to embrace it as the truth, and to repent and receive Christ; after which they are "kept by the power of God." Christian conversion, which is an act of man, is thus revealed as being also a work of God.

Conversion is an exercise of divine sovereignty. Psychologically, the discernment and the decisions are ours, yet God turns us to himself by his own initiative and power.

When we look back on our conversion, both Scripture and our own hearts tell us that we turned because we were turned. We came to trust the Lord because we were turned. We came to trust the Lord because God himself drew us to him. This explains why English-speaking Christians for more than four centuries have talked about “being converted,” as the King James Version also does, even though the Greek word for convert, *epistrepho*, is always used in the New Testament in the active voice. In this act of almighty grace, the Holy Spirit is the direct agent. He illuminates, convinces, quickens, induces new birth, imparts repentance, and prompts the converted soul’s confession, “Jesus is Lord.”

Psychologically, conversions take countless forms. Some are quiet, some tumultuous. Some are quick and clear, occurring the moment the gospel is understood, others take years before faith in Christ is confidently professed. Some occur so early in life that there is no conscious memory of them; some are deathbed occurrences.

In ministering conversion to us, however, the Spirit makes our ways converge. Wherever we start, and whatever differences we begin with—racial, social, sexual, cultural, or religious—we all end up in the same place. We enter into the same relationship of faith and love with the Lord Jesus Christ, our Savior and Master. The Spirit’s uniform success in bringing us all to this same joyous and peaceful state of mind and heart shows that the title, “Lord of grace,” which an English hymn gives him, is well deserved.

The Work Accomplished by the Holy Spirit in Conversion

The New Testament interprets conversion Christologically and pneumatologically—that is, in terms of starting life afresh with Christ through the Spirit. It exhibits conversion as an entirely new beginning, miraculous in the sense that you cannot account for it in terms of anything that preceded it. New Testament concepts used to delineate conversion include new birth; new creation; the quickening of the dead; sharing in Christ’s death and resurrection; and putting off the old self and putting on the new. These are startling images and are powerful in their meaning.

1. *New birth* (John 3:3–8) means a change in our way of existing so radical and far-reaching that the only adequate comparison is our emergence from the womb into a world unknown.
2. *New creation* (2 Corinthians 5:17) means a change of outlook and attitudes that is inexplicable in terms of what we used to be.
3. *Quickening the dead* (Ephesians 2:1–5) means the end of corpse-like unresponsiveness to God and the start of a relationship with God that is true human life.
4. *Sharing* (literally, being “grafted into”) *Christ’s death and resurrection* (Romans 6:3–11), that is, being crucified, buried, and raised with him (Galatians 2:20; Colossians 2:11–13, 20; 3:1), means a miraculous motivational change at the core of our being, which Scripture calls our *heart*. The essence of the change is that the character qualities that marked the perfect humanity of the Lord Jesus are now implanted in us. Our strongest inner drives are opposing, if not always fully overcoming, the sinful habits that previously mastered us. Our moral nature is made new and we find ourselves desiring to know, love, trust, obey, honor, and please our Savior-God more than we desire anything in the world. Every lapse into sin makes us deeply miserable in a way that was never true before.

5. *Putting on the new self in place of the old* (Ephesians 4:22–24; Colossians 3:9–10) means embracing this new life of Christlikeness that God both prescribes and bestows.

All of this becomes reality “in Christ.” Union with him, across all boundaries of time and space, is the objective fact that produces these immense changes in what we are. When we speak of conversion, therefore, both the objective fact and the subjective results should be in our minds, for both are aspects of the one reality.

Conversion, thus appears as the most significant thing that ever happens to any human being. It makes God our focus, Christ our glory, the Spirit our life, and heaven our home forever. And it is the Holy Spirit himself who effects this union, who sustains it by his indwelling presence, who makes it fruitful in Christlike living, and who will one day finish his transformation by giving us new bodies to match our renewed hearts. The Puritan, Thomas Goodwin, said that it is the Holy Spirit who “takes all the pains with us.” This, and nothing less, is his work in conversion. It is for us who believe to wonder, to adore, and to know ourselves as new creatures in Christ. We need to make it our daily goal to live out, with the Spirit’s help, what has been wrought in us by the Spirit’s power. True conversion is known by the new quality of life that it produces.

The Means Used by the Spirit in Conversion

The Holy Spirit is truly God the evangelist: He brings sinners to conversion. He does this through a variety of means. The Western habit of theological abstraction might lead us to believe (as evangelical theologians have said for four centuries) that the means in question are: (a) the preaching and teaching of the gospel, along with its visible embodiment in the two sacraments, and also with signs and wonders; (b) the demonstration of the gospel in the worship, fellowship, holiness, love, and good deeds of the church and Christian individuals; and (c) backing all of this—prayer.

Such a statement would not be false—it is, indeed, profoundly true—but it could blur our awareness of the reality behind it that sinners saved by grace are called to become the means of evangelism as we preach, teach, witness, serve, and pray. In this sense, we are all fellow workers with God. God lays upon us the awesome privilege and responsibility of being used evangelistically because in evangelization the Holy Spirit respects human nature as God made it. The Spirit employs a mode of communicating the gospel that is truly convincing simply because it is authentically incarnational.

The fullest and most potent revelation of God’s graciousness was given by our Lord Jesus Christ himself. He was in person (and in heaven still is) God incarnate. To most fully show us God’s grace, the Word became flesh. As the Gospels show, his personal impact was uniquely arresting and powerful; no one spoke like him, or behaved like him, and no one could ignore him. And other things being equal, the fullest and most potent proof that the gospel of salvation through Christ is true will be given by persons who are most clearly seen to be living in its power, and whose lives are most decisively different from the lives of those around them.

The Spirit works in us through our minds. Any genuine decision to receive the new life will be the result of conscious conviction, and conscious conviction can only be expected when the new life is visible in its exponents. Otherwise, in whatever reasons for faith we might give, credibility will be lacking, just as it would be if a bald man attempted to sell you hair restorer, or if one who had just crashed his car offered to teach you to drive. The world has a right to ask that the gospel be not only shared with them, but shown to them in the lives of the gospel’s spokesmen. We have a duty to serve the

world in both these ways.

The New Testament norm for evangelization is and always will be communication through persons. In regular pulpit preaching and in the most informal sharing of the gospel, and in all evangelistic activity in between, personal sanctity needs to be visible in the communicator. The messenger of this life-transforming gospel is at least half of the message. The most compelling communicator in the Spirit's hand will ordinarily be the person who most honestly speaks out of personal realization of spiritual need and personal experience of the new life that remedies it. Their personal desire is to share the riches of that life with others.

The worship and service of a Christian congregation which expresses the reality of the new life can be a potent evangelistic force. Spirit-filled worship and service can convince and convert through the Spirit's power in an amazingly effective way.

We also need to recognize the intrinsic superiority of nationals evangelizing within their own or similar cultures. This is more effective than having others bear the brunt of evangelizing cross-culturally where the receiving culture differs from their own in a radical way.

National evangelism is superior to cross-cultural evangelism because: (a) nationals have freedom of movement, whereas by A.D. 2000, 83 percent of the world's population are expected to be living in lands to which church-planting Western missionaries will not be admitted; (b) throughout Asia, and in other parts of the Two-Thirds World, anti-Western prejudice is strong; (c) in Asia and Africa, missionary money from the West goes much further when supporting nationals rather than Westerners; (d) pioneering by Western missionaries perpetuates the myth that Christianity is the religion of the West as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam are religions of the East, in other words, that Christianity is an ethnic rather than a universal religion; and (e) the efforts of Western missionaries in the East so easily look and feel like neo-colonialism and denominational imperialism. But the deepest reason is that appreciating the full humanity of a person who culturally is not felt to be "one of us" is harder than when a person is felt to be a part of that culture. This makes it more difficult for cross-cultural communication to be perceived as incarnational and, therefore, as convincingly true. It is as simple, and as far-reaching, as that. In lands where there are no churches, cross-cultural missionary work remains the only way to begin.

In those parts of Asia, Africa, India, China, and Latin America where the church now exists, it seems the Holy Spirit is drastically shifting the center of gravity in evangelism and church-planting from Western cross-cultural pioneering and modeling to more indigenous national movements. This is a tremendous move forward in God's global strategy. His pattern of action is, and always was, that once cross-cultural evangelism has planted a church, national evangelists, who can achieve incarnational identification with their hearers more profoundly and effectively because of the common culture, should sustain and extend the outreach.

We need to honor our Lord the Holy Spirit. Honor him by letting him remold the raw clay of our lives into a Christlike model of holy love, purity, and passion for both sanctity and souls. Honor the Spirit by confessing that in evangelism everything depends on him, and by committing ourselves to labor in evangelism as if everything depends on us. Honor the Spirit by giving ourselves afresh to Jesus Christ, whom the Spirit honors, to be his means of evangelism wherever he leads.

VIDEO PRESENTATION

Ministry of the Spirit

Producers: Mike Quintana, Stuart Bennett

Narrators: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses" (Acts 1:8). To be his witnesses is the call of the church: to be his witnesses to the uttermost ends of the earth. And so his witnesses have gone—to Ecuador, Mexico, Nigeria, and Korea.

Just as on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit imbued power and boldness to the disciples, present-day apostles are being filled so they can take the gospel of Jesus to the world with a power and boldness that can only be described as supernatural.

Yet, for many, the supernatural represents a spirit-world filled with strange, frightening creatures. The idea of the spirit-world is nothing new in many places of the globe including, South America—Quito, Ecuador to be exact. There, the Holy Spirit touched the lives of Mario and Janette Torres.

Out of work and in debt, Mario and his wife had exhausted every physical means of solving their problems.

Mario: The truth is, it was an insurmountable situation: bitterness, arguments, lack of things in the house. In fact, we even went to see a witch doctor to see what she could do for us.

Narrator: When the spiritual answer never came, Mario and his wife turned to some people who claimed they could actually speak to God. That same day, they attended a church and were so moved by the Holy Spirit that they accepted Christ and were filled with his power.

Mario: I was afraid of it because we were all standing and praying and I felt as if my tongue was all tied up, as if it wasn't me talking.

Narrator: Loaded with questions, Mario tried to sleep that night, but he was awakened every fifteen minutes with a new word from God that comforted, assured, and affirmed his salvation and new power in the Lord.

Mario: I finally said to the Lord, "Thank you for what you have done for me. Thank you for the answers you have given me."

Narrator: Soon after that, Mario began to witness and the Lord began to work.