

THE HOLY SPIRIT: THE AGENT OF CHANGE

Mission to the World, Albert Shim

We have established that the *foundation* for personal transformation is the new identity that the gospel declares over us: we now live in vital, intimate union with our Lord Jesus Christ. Christ is in us, and we are in him. Understanding the *concept* of our union to Christ, however, does not in and of itself bring about inner change; it is a new and glorious reality that we must learn to *live* out. So how is our union to Christ enacted? How is it made to bear the fruit of a changed and changing life? And relatedly, *who* is it that works it out? The answers to these questions lead us squarely to the person and work of the Holy Spirit.

“Another” Helper

On the night of his betrayal and with the cross ever looming, we find three of the most intimate chapters of the Bible in the so-called Upper Room Discourse (John 14:16). It is in this most poignant of settings that we find Jesus’ clearest and most extensive teachings on the Holy Spirit. Jesus’ bodily presence was about to be withdrawn from the disciples, and yet Jesus assures them that his presence, fellowship, and companionship would remain: “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you” (John 14:16–18).

The word translated *helper* is “a rich word for which there is no adequate English translation, since it means by turns Comforter (in the sense of Strengthened), Counselor, Helper, Supporter, Adviser, Advocate, Ally, Senior Friend . . .”¹ When Jesus says that he will ask the Father for *another* helper, the implication is that Jesus was to his disciples the *first* helper. But now, the Holy Spirit would assume Jesus’ role as helper-advocate-friend, and he would be with them *forever*. In some way, the presence of Jesus would remain with his disciples.

God’s Indwelling Presence

Now if that weren’t glorious enough, Jesus then says something that one writer suggests, “ought to make us shiver in our shoes.”² The Spirit, he says “dwells with you *and will be in you*” (John 14:17). If you are a Christian, the real, personal presence of the living God dwells within you. Take a moment to digest that. If you are a Christian, the real, personal presence of the living God dwells within you. Now if that is too abstract to seem relevant or practical, let me share a quote and then tell you a story.

First, the quote:

Presence is a delicious word. Nothing can take the place of presence, not gifts, not telephone calls, not pictures, not mementos, nothing. Ask the person who has lost a lifelong mate what they miss the most; the answer is invariably “presence.” When we are ill, we don’t need soothing words nearly as much as we need loved ones to be present. What makes shared life—walks, concerts, outings—so pleasurable? Presence.³

This was illustrated to me in a powerful way many years ago. Five months after the birth of our first daughter, I was rendered temporarily paraplegic. In response to a viral infection, my body began to attack my spinal cord so that my nerves weren’t working properly. It began with an intense tingling in my hands that I just dismissed, but then at around 2:30 a.m., I woke up with a searing, burning pain in my back. To this day, it remains the worst pain I’ve ever felt and it was a pain that would only later be relieved with a medication seven times stronger than morphine.

I remember vividly crawling out of bed to the top step of our staircase in our apartment, just praying, “God, please make this pain go away. God, please make this pain go away.” And that prayer was more or less on repeat. Less than a minute into that prayer, God moved me in such a way as to re-direct my prayer. I can’t explain it in any other way except to say that I knew instinctively that I was not to pray that anymore in that moment. And the prayer he gave me to pray instead was: “God, just let me know that you are with me. Just let me know that you are with me.” And I prayed that over and over again. *That* was the prayer that God answered. In those two weeks of uncertainty and fear, in and out of the hospital on two separate occasions, God met me with a tenderness and a sweetness that I did not even have a mental category for to that point in my life as a Christian.

One very real way that he answered that prayer was by his love—his *presence*—that I perceived in the presence of my friends. I remember the presence of my community group that gathered to have a weeknight meeting around my hospital bed. I remember the presence of Peter and Lisa, who one night brought by a nectarine from the Farmer’s Market, and in my mind I can still taste how sweet it was. I remember the look of concern on Walter and Terry’s faces when they saw how I struggled to take a single step. I remember Arthur, who was always trying to get me to watch more movies, brought over a DVD and we

watched it together in silence one afternoon. And of course, there was my wife Tina who was there to cry and to pray with me every limping step of the way.

That's presence. It is real, it cannot be faked, and it is deeply affecting. When was the last time you were deeply affected by God's *presence*? Do you know that God does not send you a text or a phone call? He does not simply give you a list of rules to follow or a pamphlet of things about him that you're supposed to know. He does not FedEx a ticket to heaven in return for your faith—"I'll see you when you get here." No, God gives you himself. His *presence*. His very life with you and in you.

We have been united to Christ in his death and resurrection, and are even now united *in this present life*, by the indwelling Spirit of God. John writes, "By this we know that we abide in him and he in us"—there's union—"because he has given us of his Spirit" (1 John 4:13). The Holy Spirit, who dwells in us, is the bond of our union to Christ. And again, this union is not an abstract idea; it is not theoretical, it is *relational*. It is experienced, not deduced. If the Holy Spirit is in us, it will be deeply affecting and it will be as real to us as a Farmer's Market nectarine.

Presence, Temples, and Christian Character

Now if the Holy Spirit, who is God, *dwells in us*, then it is no surprise to hear Paul refer to Christians, both individually and collectively, as temples of God. A quick survey of the places where Paul most explicitly refers to Christians as temples (1 Cor. 3:16; 1 Cor. 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:19–22) is revealing in that we find Paul addressing in turn divisions in the community, sexual immorality, marriage ethics, and racial unity in the church. What is striking to me is the sheer ordinariness of that to which the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit is applied, not to mention the enduring challenges these issues continue to present today. But the point is that there are ethical implications to our union with Christ through the indwelling Spirit of God. If it is real, then it simply must affect the way that we live. The Holy Spirit does not come to dwell in us only so that our lives might bear no evidence of him. Neither does the Holy Spirit come to dwell in us to burden us with a new set of demands; he does not simply replace one law for another.

Rather, the Holy Spirit, promised to us by Christ himself (John 14:16); sent to us by Christ so that we might bear witness to Christ (John 15:26); whose ministry is to glorify Christ (John 16:14); and who in dwelling within us unites us to Christ (John 14:17; 1 John 4:13; Rom. 8:9–11); this Spirit is the one who works in the interior life of the Christian, to transform us more and more into the likeness of Christ. This is the inevitable consequence of one who bears in their being the Spirit of Christ. Paul writes, "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, 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 Cor. 3:17–18).

The Holy Spirit then is the *agent* of personal transformation, who alone is the source of inner heart change such that the character of Christ actually becomes a part of our character in increasing measure. We simply do not have the power to change ourselves through self-effort however well-intentioned, well-directed, or vigorously pursued. By sheer strength of resolve, we may be able to change our external actions for a season, but we cannot change our own hearts: ". . . inner righteousness is a gift from God to be graciously received. The needed change within us is God's work, not ours. *The demand is for an inside job*, and only God can work from the inside. We cannot attain or earn this righteousness of the kingdom of God; it is a grace that is given."⁴ Now the *means* of this change will involve the full and intense engagement of our will and our energies as we'll soon see, but the Holy Spirit alone can change our hearts.

Spiritual formation, Christian discipleship, is not a self-improvement project. It is the miracle that happens when the living God comes to dwell in us. And although it is "an inside job," the work of the Holy Spirit will and must find *external* expression. The apostle Paul calls it fruit. The one who lives in organic, vital union with Christ will bear the fruit of the Spirit of Christ: a life increasingly characterized by "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Gal. 5:22–23). That is not a list of virtues for us to work on. That's what the Spirit is like. And when he dwells in us, we'll become more and more like that too. This heart change, toward conformity to Christ is the substance of Christian character. It is what it means to be *formed* by Christ, or to have Christ formed in us. It is what it means to be his disciple. And it is enacted by the Holy Spirit who dwells in us and will be with us forever.

1. J. I. Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit*, 54.

2. N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian*, 131.

3. Gordon Fee, *Paul, the Spirit and the People of God*, 9.

4. Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 6.

EXERCISE: SELF-EXAMINATION AND THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT

Writing more than a century ago, Octavius Winslow notes in the preface to his incisive work *Personal Declension and Revival of Religion in the Soul*: “It must be admitted, that the character and the tendencies of the age are not favourable to deep and mature reflection upon the hidden, spiritual life of the soul.”⁵ How much more fitting is that assessment now in our wired age. Winslow goes on to share the purpose of his book, which is a fitting introduction to this exercise:

It is, then, the humble design of the writer in the present work . . . to aid the believer in answering the solemn and searching inquiry, “What is the present spiritual state of my soul before God?” In the following pages he is exhorted to forget the Christian profession he sustains, the party badge he wears, and the distinctive name by which he is known among men,—to turn aside for a brief hour from all religious duties, engagements and excitement, and to look this question fully and fairly in the face.”⁶

The purpose of this exercise is to invite honest self-examination and to ask ourselves, Is there evidence in my life of the inner workings of the Holy Spirit? Does my life bear the fruit of the Spirit of Christ? Remember that although heart change is an “inside job,” the work of the Holy Spirit will find external expression. The ones who live in organic, vital union with Christ bear the fruit of the one who dwells within them: a life increasingly characterized by “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal. 5:22–23). Take this time now to honestly consider the following questions:

1. Am I a more loving person today than I was two years ago? Am I growing in my concern for the well-being of others?
2. Am I a more joyful person today than I was two years ago? Is my joy more resilient in the face of disappointment? What steals my joy?
3. Am I more or less prone to anxiety and worry? Do I seek reconciliation or avoidance when there is conflict?
4. Am I a more patient person? Am I able to deal kindly with those who are unkind to me or are otherwise difficult to love?
5. Am I a kinder person? Am I more sympathetic? Am I less discriminating with my kindness?
6. Am I growing in goodness? Am I growing in my hatred toward sin? Is there a growing correspondence between my words and my actions?
7. Am I growing in faithfulness to God and to others? Am I more devoted to God? Am I loyal and dependable?
8. Am I a gentler person? Am I more or less harsh with others? Am I more apt to listen?
9. Am I more self-controlled? Am I more or less controlled by my impulses?

5. Octavius Winslow, *Personal Declension and Revival of Religion in the Soul*, 5.

6. *Ibid*, 6.