

Seven Ways John Wesley Preached about the Holy Spirit

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by Chris Ritter

“Holy Ghost, no more delay; Come, and in thy temple stay: Now thine inward witness bear, Strong, and permanent, and clear: Spring of life, thyself impart; Rise eternal in my heart.”

Wesleyans are Holy Spirit people. From its inception, the Methodist Revival was a Spirit-born resurgence of scriptural Christianity. The quote above from a Charles Wesley hymn is one of countless examples that illustrate an emphasis and dependency upon the work of God’s Spirit. John Wesley was criticized for many things, but perhaps the most common charge against him was “enthusiasm.” His insistence on the direct, palpable, daily influence of the Spirit in the Christian life rubbed like sandpaper against the dry, formal Christianity of his day. His consistent defense was that his Gospel was nothing other than the faith of the apostles recorded authoritatively in the New Testament.

As Pentecost Sunday approaches, I thought it worthwhile to survey John Wesley’s preaching on the topic of the Holy Spirit. Here are seven core convictions from his collected sermons:

First, The Holy Spirit Provides Unbelievers with Conviction of their Lostness and Sin.

Wesley preached of the Third Person of the Trinity as primary agent in convincing sinners of their deplorable state and their need for a Savior. In harmony with John 16:8, Wesley spoke of the Holy Spirit as the agent of the prevenient grace that brings us before the throne of God’s grace.

If [The Holy Spirit] doth not now bear witness with thy spirit, that thou art a child of God, O that he might convince thee, thou poor unawakened sinner, by his demonstration and power, that thou art a child of the devil! O that, as I prophesy, there might now be “a noise and a shaking;” and may “the bones come together, bone to his bone!” Then “come from the four winds, O Breath! and breathe on these slain, that they may live!” And do not ye harden your hearts, and resist the Holy Ghost, who even now is come to convince you of sin, “because you believe not on the name of the only begotten Son of God.”

– from his sermon “Awake, Thou that Sleepest”

Second, The Holy Spirit Provides the Miracle of New Birth.

To be a Christian in the biblical sense of the word is to experience a total inward transformation of the soul that can only be wrought by the power of the Holy Spirit. For Wesley, the New Birth is a birth in and by the Spirit.

And, in general, from all the passages of holy writ wherein this expression, “the being born of God,” occurs, we may learn that it implies not barely the being baptized, or any outward change whatever; but a vast inward change, a change wrought in the soul, by the operation of the Holy Ghost; a change in the whole manner of our existence; for, from the moment we are born of God, we live in quite another manner than we did before; we are, as it were, in another world.”

-from his sermon, "The Great Privilege of Those Who are Born of God"

Third, the Christian Life is Life Under the Influence of the Holy Spirit

Wesley despaired that the leaders of the church of his day understood so little about how integral the Holy Spirit is to the effective Christian life. He continually made the case that the "normal" life of faith is infused with the power of the Holy Spirit. Speaking to church leaders he offered the godly rebuke below. In the further quote from "Awake Thou that Sleepest" he demonstrates that an emphasis on an experiential relationship with the Holy Spirit is in keeping with the doctrines and liturgy of the Church of England.

May it not be one of the consequences of this, that so many of you are a generation of triflers; triflers with God, with one another, and with your own souls. For, how few of you spend, from one week to another, a single hour in private prayer! How few have any thought of God in the general tenor of your conversation! Who of you is in any degree acquainted with the work of his Spirit, his supernatural work in the souls of men? Can you bear, unless now and then in a church, any talk of the Holy Ghost? Would you not take it for granted, if one began such a conversation, that it was either hypocrisy or enthusiasm? In the name of the Lord God Almighty, I ask, what religion are you of? Even the talk of Christianity, ye cannot, will not bear. O my brethren, what a "Christian city" is this!

-from his sermon, "Scriptural Christianity"

It nothing helps them to say, "We do not deny the assistance of God's Spirit; but only this inspiration, this receiving the Holy Ghost: and being sensible of it. It is only this feeling of the Spirit, this being moved by the Spirit, or filled with it, which we deny to have any place in sound religion." But, in only denying this, you deny the whole Scriptures; the whole truth, and promise, and testimony of God. Our own excellent Church knows nothing of this devilish distinction; but speaks plainly of "feeling the Spirit of Christ" [Article 17]; of being "moved by the Holy Ghost" [Office of consecrating Priests] and knowing and "feeling there is no other name than that of Jesus," [Visitation of the Sick] whereby we can receive" life and salvation. She teaches us all to pray for the "inspiration of the Holy Spirit" [Collect before Holy Communion]; yea, that we may be "filled with the Holy Ghost" [Order of Confirmation]. Nay, and every Presbyterian of hers professes to receive the Holy Ghost by the imposition of hands. Therefore, to deny any of these, is, in effect, to renounce the Church of England, as well as the whole Christian revelation."

-from his sermon "Awake Thou that Sleepest"

Fourth, the Supernatural Gifts of the Holy Spirit Did not Cease, but Merely Got Lost in the Worldliness of a Distracted Church

Wesley never bought into the notion that the supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit ceased after the time of the apostles. Rather, he tied the loss of supernatural Christianity to the worldly clericalism that entered the Church during the post-Constantinian era. Wesley believed that the supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit were to be an expected part of the life of faith.

It does not appear that these extraordinary gifts of the Holy Ghost [tongues, prophecies, miracles, etc.] were common in the church for more than two or three centuries. We seldom hear of them after that fatal period when the Emperor Constantine called himself a Christian, and from a vain imagination of promoting the Christian cause thereby heaped riches, and power, and honor, upon the Christians in

general; but in particular upon the Christian clergy. From this time they almost totally ceased; very few instances of the kind were found. The cause of this was not (as has been vulgarly supposed,) “because there was no more occasion for them,” because all the world was become Christian. This is a miserable mistake; not a twentieth part of it was then nominally Christian. The real cause was, “the love of many,” almost of all Christians, so called, was “waxed cold.” The Christians had no more of the Spirit of Christ than the other Heathens. The Son of Man, when he came to examine his Church, could hardly “find faith upon earth.” This was the real cause why the extraordinary gifts of the Holy Ghost were no longer to be found in the Christian Church — because the Christians were turned Heathens again, and had only a dead form left.

-from his sermon, “The More Excellent Way”

Fifth, the Holy Spirit Provides Assurance of Salvation

Wesley preached that we could know whether we were children of God or not through the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit. He spoke of this assurance as an inward peace, joy, love, and delight. The Witness of the Spirit, or Doctrine of Assurance, is one of the hallmarks of Wesleyan theology. Wesley insisted that those without the Holy Spirit indwelling them are not Christians, “for a Christian is a man that is ‘anointed with the Holy Ghost and with power.’” (from “Awake Thou that Sleepest”)

“And, First, as to the witness of our spirit: The soul as intimately and evidently perceives when it loves, delights, and rejoices in God, as when it loves and delights in anything on earth. And it can no more doubt, whether it loves, delights, and rejoices or no, than whether it exists or no. If, therefore this be just reasoning, He that now loves God, that delights and rejoices in him with an humble joy, and holy delight, and an obedient love, is a child of God; But I thus love, delight, and rejoice in God; Therefore, I am a child of God...”

-from his sermon, “The Witness of the Spirit, Discourse One”

“The sum of all this is: The testimony of the Spirit is an inward impression on the souls of believers, whereby the Spirit of God directly testifies to their spirit, that they are children of God.

– from his sermon, “The Witness of the Spirit, Discourse Two”

Sixth, to Be Filled with the Holy Spirit is to be a Living Portrait of Christ

Not surprisingly, John Wesley preached often about the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. The goal of this sanctification is to make us a “lively portraiture” (living portrait) of Jesus. In his sermon “On the Holy Spirit”, Wesley says that the Spirit moves us toward the completed state that will be realized in eternity: “The gift of the Holy Spirit looks full to the resurrection; for then is the life of God completed in us.” You can see in Wesley’s pneumatology echoes of the Eastern Orthodox concept of theosis, the transforming process that leads us to union and likeness with God. Remember his brother’s famous lyrics, “Adam’s likeness now erase, stamp thine image in its place.” Wesley addressed his fellow clergy in a portion of his sermon “Scriptural Christianity”:

In the fear, then, and in the presence of the great God, before whom both you and I shall shortly appear, I pray you that are in authority over us, whom I reverence for your office sake, to consider (and not after the manner of dissemblers with God), are you “filled with the Holy Ghost”? Are you lively portraitures of

him whom ye are appointed to represent among men? "I have said, Ye are gods," ye magistrates and rulers; ye are by office so nearly allied to the God of heaven! In your several stations and degrees, ye are to show forth unto us "the Lord our Governor." Are all the thoughts of your hearts, all your tempers and desires, suitable to your high calling? Are all your words like unto those which come out of the mouth of God? Is there in all your actions dignity and love—a greatness which words cannot express, which can flow only from a heart "full of God?"

— from his sermon, "Scriptural Christianity"

Seventh, Do not Grieve the Holy Spirit.

Wesley preached caution against opposing the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. He himself is the "sign, seal, and security of our salvation." The greatest tragedy is when we break this seal with our own hands. On the contrary, we enhance our lives by partnering with the work of the Holy Spirit and joyfully marching toward the glorious future he has for us. The Holy Spirit is our foretaste of glory.

"Now, if the Holy Spirit be the sign, the seal, and the security of our salvation, then, by grieving him by our sins, we break up this seal with our own hands, we cancel our firmest security, and, as much as in us lies, reverse our own title to eternal life... Besides this, the Holy Spirit within us is the security of our salvation; he is likewise an earnest of it, and assures our spirits that we have a title to eternal happiness. "The Spirit of God beareth witness with our spirits that we are the children of God." And in order that this inward testimony may be lively and permanent, it is absolutely necessary to attend carefully to the secret operation of the Holy Spirit within us; who, by infusing his holy consolations into our souls, by enlivening our drooping spirits, and giving us a quick relish of his promises, raises bright and joyous sensations in us, and gives a man, beforehand, a taste of the bliss to which he is going. "

-from his sermon "On Grieving the Holy Spirit"

These seven themes form what I see as the core of Wesley's preaching about the Holy Spirit. But this is in no way an exhaustive list. As time allows I will publish a follow-up post on this same topic. There is so much good material left on the cutting room floor. Have a blessed and Spirit-filled Pentecost!