

Developing Biblical Language to Talk about the Holy Spirit

By Bob Young

As I analyze my early years in church, the Holy Spirit was largely absent in my faith experience. That is true for many of us who grew up in the post-World War II era in churches of Christ -- and for some who are younger. It is fair to say that the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Christian was not talked about much in the local church I grew up in. At the same time, other religious groups were talking about the Holy Spirit almost endlessly (and aimlessly!) so that every feeling, thought, and experience was equated with the presence and leading of the Holy Spirit. I am thankful that many of us in the churches of Christ are thinking about, wanting to know, and seeking a biblical understanding of the Holy Spirit. There is increased interest in spirituality, spiritual warfare, and the role of the Holy Spirit.

In contradiction to the extremes mentioned—minimalizing or excluding the Spirit, and attributing almost everything to the Spirit—the role of the Holy Spirit is made clear in Scripture. Scripture is clear as it describes how God moves toward us and within us through his Spirit. The Bible describes how we experience the Holy Spirit and how he moves, works and leads in our lives. The Bible says that he quickens, comforts, transforms, and tests us. The Holy Spirit empowers our prayers and gives us weapons for the spiritual struggle. We live in the dispensation of the Spirit, but that fact does not minimize the role of the Father or the Son.

Because the Holy Spirit was not a part of our early teachings for many in churches of Christ, we did not develop a biblical language of the Holy Spirit. We did not develop a clear understanding of the Godhead. I often cringe as I listen to prayers, public statements, and teaching. Many, even church leaders and public participants, apparently do not understand what the Bible says concerning the actions of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. Many Christians fail to distinguish the unique roles and actions of the persons who make up the Godhead. Now that our interest in the Holy Spirit has been piqued, many have adopted the language of the “nations around us” rather than going to Scripture to develop our understanding and language. We must return to Scripture to catch God’s grand vision for his people today.

Trinity is not a biblical word, but it summarizes what we know about God since Jesus has come in the Incarnation and the Spirit has come beginning at Pentecost. “God in Three Persons” revealed himself in Christ and is now experienced through the presence of the Spirit. We desperately need clarity. We must study the Bible lest we follow those around us into distortions. Christians follow the risen Christ, by the power of the Spirit, to the glory and praise of the Father. The Spirit points to Christ, Christ points to the Father, and the Father points to the Son and the Spirit. For those committed to returning to biblical teaching, understanding the relational nature of God in the Father, Son, and Spirit is essential to understanding the nature of our discipleship as Christ-followers.

Gordon Fee, in his study of all of the Holy Spirit texts in Paul (*God’s Empowering Presence*, 902), says it well: “...recapturing the Pauline perspective will cause the church to be more vitally Trinitarian, not only in its theology, but in its life and spirituality as well. This will mean not the exaltation of the Spirit, but the exaltation of God; and it will mean not focus on the Spirit as such, but on the Son, crucified and risen, Savior and Lord of all.”