

EMPIRICAL, THEORETICAL – WHATEVER

The theme for the upcoming lectureship at Faulkner University in Montgomery, Alabama is “You Who Are Spiritual,” with many interesting sub-titles for discussion. In a special two-hour session of open forum one brother will affirm: “The Holy Spirit dwells in the Christian indirectly as do the Father and the Son and does not act directly upon the Christian.” The other discussion leader will affirm: “The Holy Spirit himself actually dwells in the faithful child of God and directly helps him in addition to the word.”

That controversial issue is not new for me. I can recall it being discussed by the sincerest of disciples seventy years ago. Why has the matter not been fully resolved by now? Since students of equal intelligence and sincerity have not reached the same answer, there must be some lack of definition of it in the Scriptures. Uh-oh, I just lost some of you of both convictions for you are both declaring that you have the definite answer! Right?

All of us have the same factual information about the Holy Spirit but all do not use the same logic in evaluating it. The theories we formulate from evidences may then either mesh with or collide with empirical factors of experience, feelings, anecdotal testimonies, mystery, subjectivity, wishful thinking, and emotion – even emotional disorders. Having been a convinced believer and teacher on both sides of this issue, I will offer some observations with no thought of pulling you all to the same conclusion.

We all have roots, and who we are greatly influences our interpretation of facts. My upbringing was in very austere circumstances physically, financially, socially, and in religious instruction. As stoic survivors, we met the harsh realities of life on a small farm during the extreme drought years of the Great Depression nurturing little imagination or emotion. No doubt, this climate fit and reinforced my inherited mentality bent more toward logic than feeling. So I interpreted life and religion from this perspective.

In the summers of my teenage years in West Texas, my brother and I would move our old iron bedstead out of the crowded farm shack in which we lived and put it out under the open sky. There each night we could marvel at the dazzling display of God’s mysterious handiwork of twinkling stars and flashing meteorites. It was a celestial show of which city dwellers may hardly be aware.

That, too, added to my realistic (materialistic?) thinking. I never looked into the sky thinking that God was enthroned directly above me. With my limited knowledge I realized that on this whirling, wobbling sphere, the point above me is only for the instant, never to be the same until the about the same time a year later. I did not think of angelic beings or spiritual personages inhabiting the sky

above, in the vacuum of space, or upon any celestial body. Neither did I imagine that Satanic or demonic spirits surrounded me from those realms. Nor did I sense any influence due to alignment of the stars as in the pagan suppositions of astrology, the Zodiac, or the horoscope. I thought of God as omnipresent, not being located or limited by specific physical bounds, for the Spirit is not identified nor confined by physics. By contemplation of my world, I perceived the Creator and Ruler of the universe as awesome beyond comprehension. However, those were more factual concepts that produced no feeling of relationship, personal identification, or emotional affection.

In those formative years, the preachers explained that the Spirit of God works through the Word he has revealed and that we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (salvation) at our obedience to the Word in baptism. Then the Spirit continues to indwell us through the Word, never abiding in one who has not heard the Word. The manifestations of the Spirit were limited to the beginning and development stages of the church, according to their explanations. I served as a disciple holding to such concepts and teaching them in my earlier years of ministry.

Then our people “discovered” the Holy Spirit. He seemed to have been less obvious in the Old Testament writings but was sort of brought to life in the New. Many teachers began to contend that the Holy Spirit actually indwells the disciple, being active in the various aspects of daily life of the person. In my restudy, I soon reinterpreted the Scriptural teachings and changed my former theory in favor of the latter.

Now some questions are in order. Had the Spirit been working in my life previously? Did my change in understanding change what the Spirit had been doing for me? If I must understand the working of the Holy Spirit before he works, then I am terribly deprived! He has never required you and me to understand everything about his working in order for him to work for our benefit. His fulfillment of promises are not rewards for our correctness of comprehension.

When my understanding changed (for the better, I trust), what change did that make in me? I did not begin to have euphoric sensations or “feel the presence of the Lord.” I did not begin speaking in foreign languages or in ecstatic utterances. No visions, dreams, strange voices. I still trusted in the Lord as before. It did not make me more sincere, more honest, more loving, more obedient, more joyous, or more peaceful. It was a change of understanding of a theoretical matter.

Neither before nor after my change of concepts has there been an undeniable miraculous happening in my life. Surely, there have been circumstances that I cannot explain, but because we do not know the facts involved in a happening does not mean that it is a miracle. While serving God with my previous concept, I gave him credit for working in my life though I could point to no miraculous events or spoken messages. I based my belief on his promises rather than my

experiences. That same acknowledgment has continued since my change of concepts.

So what is the debate about? Is it purely theoretical? Here is where the most questionable elements enter. Someone has observed that most of us respond more to what we are made to feel than to facts we learn. So empirical elements of subjectivity are added to the theory by many disciples. The persons who believe the Spirit, in mysterious ways, is working in their lives may consciously look for evidences from experience. An emotional tension may be interpreted as a warning by the Spirit. Or relaxation from an anxiety may be thought to be a positive answer.

While it is true that special spokesmen for God have heard heavenly messages, seen visions, and received revelations, others have experienced similar phenomena that have failed the test of truth. Even similar affectations have been due to psychotic disorders, and manic-depression can bring unexplained mood changes. It is shocking to note that many persons making the news due to psychotic behavior have built their delusions around religion. Persons trusting in empirical “evidences” make a ready market for all sorts of remedies and cures for physical ailments. Just listen to radio stations devoted to religion and marvel at all the “alternative medicine” whose efficacy is confirmed by testimonials rather than scientific research.

This is not a denial that the Holy Spirit of God and Christ indwell or that they work in our lives. I am in no position to deny what you have seen, heard, or felt any more than I can deny what you dreamed last night. But your experiences are authentic only for you. They offer me no proof. Anecdotal testimonies, like those we hear promoting medications and treatments, appeal to the emotional person who is willing to forego investigation. Since no one can disprove one’s subjective testimony, some have been known to yield to the temptation to embellish their own testimonies for effect. When a person shares a message that “the Spirit put on my heart,” the claim may be to add authenticity to the message which may even prove to be untrue, as some we have heard.

Continued study and discussion to better appreciate the workings of the Spirit is of value. It may do more harm than good, however, if it is done with polarizing effect with effort to bind either viewpoint. The important things are to acknowledge and trust that the Holy Spirit works for our benefit. The theoretical or empirical definitions as to how it is done or discerned should not be a divisive issue. Those holding one viewpoint should not feel superior to the others, nor should one viewpoint demand rejection of those whose conclusions differ. The unifying principles set forth by Paul in Romans 14 apply well to this matter.

(Cecil Hook; February 2001) []

