

Ode to the Holy Spirit

Essay, Judith Doctor, April, 2000

Forty years ago something new in the church exploded, something that traditional Christianity had not experienced for a long time. Called the Charismatic Movement, the winds of renewal brought a Divine touch to millions of people around the world. The movement now claims 450 million adherents worldwide and is growing at the rate of over 23 million per year. It is found among 8000 different ethnic groups speaking 7000 different languages.

These people all share a basic single event, a vital life-changing encounter with the Holy Spirit — an event that crystallized for them the reality of a living and personal God. This outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon modern man occurred on the heels of a great upheaval in our Western culture.

Crisis of Western Culture—The Unreality of God

In the years following WWII, our society had entered into a time of crisis as our social structures began to collapse. The demise of the family and its attendant support system and values produced a moral and spiritual void, resulting in the incredible growth of socially disordered populations — suicides, child abuse, violent assaults, homicides, substance abuse and alcoholism. It was most dramatically seen in our streets and in prisons.

Unable to help the alcoholic and drug addict, the religious institutions were no longer meeting the real needs of the people. By the 1960s, the church had become institutionalized, rigid, and hierarchical. Using merely formulas and techniques, it was devoid of redemptive power and authority.

Many people did not claim vital personal experience or a life-changing redemptive religion. Stuck in these structures, people failed to grow or develop; they remained infantile and dependent upon the leaders in these institutions. Moreover, the thunderous voices of the great preachers in the early part of the twentieth century were largely unheard. An eerie silence had settled upon the land—a land that had lost its God.

Institutions and structures are necessary components of all enduring human enterprise. But they are never sufficient to satisfy the longing of the human soul for ultimate personal value and significance. Nor can they adequately channel the incomprehensible radiance of divine energy and love.

The Demise of God

As a result, something incredible had happened in our western culture, in the consciousness of modern man. God died. Not really, but in effect God had no meaning or relevance for many people. They could no longer detect anything of the Divine in their experience.

In the late 1960s, a landmark cover of *Time Magazine* proclaimed the demise of God. This was Western man's confession, a cultural event by which we recognized and admitted our poverty of spirit and soul. God was dead in the way the western world knew Him. No longer could we sing the songs of God with faith. The old symbols and creeds no longer had power to move us.

It was not merely the inability to believe certain things about God and man that our forefathers believed. The trouble was the "inability" to feel towards God and man as they did.

Although religious language still performed a duty as a means of communication, it had been neutralized. The soul of modern man could no longer connect to these words and feel their force. Our Christian symbols had lost their claim upon man's consciousness and their power to command his mode of being.

Severed from our metaphysical foundation, our theological roots and any sacramental significance, human existence lost its transcendental dimension. God's absence from our current experience, the irrelevance and meaninglessness of all talk about him, created a crisis in western culture. The result was religious and cultural alienation.

We lost touch with a living God because we had become alienated from ourselves and our world. Hegel lamented "a severance of mind from world, soul from circumstance, human inwardness from external condition." Nietzsche contrasted "an inner life to which nothing outward corresponds and an outward existence unrelated to what is within." Tillich wrote, "the state of our whole life is estrangement from others and ourselves, because we are estranged from the ground of our being, from the origin and aim of our life."

Cut Off from Ourselves

Our culture has substituted a scientific, technological world-view for a mythological one. Through societal pressures to conform, we become outer directed. This leads to becoming dangerously neurotic, with a tendency to participate and identify with others until we ourselves become empty.

Trying to tame and institutionalize the Christian life, we substituted dogma and formulas for experience. Through rationalism (over-emphasis on reason), Christianity and the Western world no longer know how to deal with their inner lives (heart, spirit, subconscious).

Because this whole area of our lives has been cut off and ignored—not only by Western culture but also by the Church—people become unable to deal successfully with the forces within them (repressed hurts, fears, anxieties, forces of darkness) and increasingly are left to seek out various escapes. Others become neurotic and psychotic; still others drift toward the occult and Eastern religions to attempt to satisfy the inner desires of the spirit that are not being met in "rational Christianity."

The Old Testament prophet Ezekiel said it like this: "Our bones are dried up, and our hope has perished. We are completely cut off to ourselves" (Ezekiel 37:11, NASV).

Traditional pillars of society lost their place of influence and power—the minister, the family doctor, the teacher, the judge, government leaders. No one knows for sure the total effects on our culture, but one thing is clear: the death-of-God theology left Western man adrift in a sea of self-doubt and confusion.

Lines from "The Rock" by the poet, T.S. Eliot capture this feeling

But it seems that something has happened that has never happened before:
though we know not just when, or why, or how, or where.

Men have left GOD not for other gods, they say, but for no god; and this has
never happened before.

That men both deny gods and worship gods; professing first Reason,

And then Money, and Power and what they call Life, or Race, or Dialectic.

The Church disowned, the tower overthrown, the bells upturned, what have
we to do

But stand with empty hands and palms turned upwards
In an age which advances progressively backwards?

Gabriel Vahanian wrote, "If Christian symbols have lost their claim upon man's consciousness and their power to command his mode of being, who will restore these to him? It is not modern man in his present cultural context; his inaptitude for the reality of God's transcending presence would prevent him from that in the first place. Our soul is not attuned to the Divine." (Vahanian, *The Meaning of The Death of God*", p. 10)

A Light Appears

In April 1960, a flickering flame of hope emerged in the spiritual darkness. *Time Magazine* carried the story: An Episcopal priest, Dennis Bennett, had announced to his congregation that he had been baptized in the Holy Spirit and had spoken in tongues. In the midst of our great spiritual vacuum, a lonely voice of one minister boldly proclaimed that modern man can still experience God and the realm of His Spirit.

This event seems to mark the beginning of the modern Charismatic Renewal. Other magazines picked up the story. Like a wildfire before a mighty wind, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit quickly spread to most of the historic Protestant denominations. Informal prayer gatherings of people sprang up all across the country, rejoicing and singing praises to a living God, witnessing to His power, and ministering to one another in the gifts of the Spirit.

In 1967, twenty professors and graduate students from Duquesne University in Pittsburgh gathered for a retreat. Their pre-retreat assignment was to read the book of Acts and David Wilkerson's *The Cross and the Switchblade*. As they gathered in the chapel, they too experienced a mighty outpouring of the Spirit. This fire of the Spirit soon spread to Notre Dame University.

Catholic Charismatic prayer groups sprang up across the country. By 1970, a Catholic Charismatic conference at Notre Dame attracted 30,000 Catholics. Priests, nuns and laypeople together sang and prayed in tongues, prophesied and rejoiced in what God was doing.

Interestingly, Pope John XXIII had specifically prayed for the Holy Spirit to come and once more revive the church: "May there be repeated thus in the Christian family the spectacle of the apostles gathered together in Jerusalem after the Ascension of Jesus to heaven, and may the Divine Spirit Renew your wonders in our time, as though for a new Pentecost." The Lord certainly answered His prayer!

An ecumenical gift of grace poured out on all the churches. Extensive cross-pollination occurred between Protestants and Catholics. A highpoint of the renewal occurred in 1977 when 52,000 people met in Kansas City. Half of the registrants were Catholic, half were Protestants – Lutherans, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, denomination Pentecostals, Baptists, Methodist, and even Messianic Jews. Together they rejoiced and worshipped freely before the Lord.

Since then there have been other waves of the Holy Spirit's work. Whether termed Pentecostals, Charismatics or Third Wavers, they continue to share an inner reality of a living God. We have seen an unprecedented proliferation of charismatic gifts throughout the Church. Once thought to be only for a select, saintly few, these gifts occur now among the faithful everywhere. To contain this kind of explosion, new denominations have formed. Thousands of independent Charismatic denominations have formed worldwide.

A host of ordinary people now bear witness to the reality of the power and presence of God working in their families and their personal lives. Their lives are a testimony of one who has seen and heard and sensed and lived Christ. They speak with the voice of vital personal experience, I-know-because-I-know-because-I-know. This is the one voice people still listen to today.

Individuals Changed By the Power of God

Forty years have gone by since the Holy Spirit was poured out upon a dry and thirsty land, giving us once more the assurance that God is alive. A generation of people are witnesses to the reality of a living God. They have seen demonstrations of the power of God, seen his strong right hand at work in their lives.

Christianity first and foremost is not meant to be a creed to be recited, a ceremony, a system of social ethics, or only a social bill of rights — it is a Divine, vital life-giving power that can be tapped. It is a source of inward power by which weak personalities can become strong, divided personalities can become unified, hurt minds can be healed, the secret of peace and poise attained.

And my word and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God (1 Corinthians 2:4-5).

Many people today have been touched by God in a real, life-giving way. They speak of direct experiences with the Lord. They witness to the truth of God's promises to heal the sick, perform miracles, and set people free. They speak about God bringing dreams, visions, and prophecies. Their faith has been quickened and made alive. As a result, their worship, prayers, faith, and Bible reading are alive to them. They nourish an inward way of knowing God.

People who have experienced God personally have rediscovered direct spiritual contact with God and once again become open to intuitive, spiritual experiences. They have learned that God kept His promises; He would sustain them under the most adverse of circumstances; and they learned the nature of God.

Formation of Lay Ministries

Their voices have gone around the world, in print, audio recordings, radio, television, and internet. They have a boldness and confidence in sharing their faith, praying for others, ministering healing and deliverance, love, and comfort to others. They are a light to others.

Some have even moved out on their own through what is called "*ministries*," doing service at home and abroad as an expression of their personal faith. I know many of these people — and I am one of them.

God is no longer dead nor confined to history

God seems once again to have taken center stage in the arena of public thought. Angels, miracles, faith, healing, and demons are often topics of public discussion. In fact, God has made the front page of our big city newspapers, even appearing on the covers of *Time Magazine* once more. Television programs, such as *Touch By An Angel*, are being produced.

People made spiritually alive are involved in their communities, schools, organizations, mission trips abroad, and their churches. As a result, the whole Body of Christ has been enlivened!

Post-script: May 19, 2018

On the eve of Pentecost Sunday, I look back at this outpouring of the Holy Spirit in my generation and ask, what has been the result of it? For you personally, for your family, for your church, and for your country?

How has this outpouring impacted your life? How have you changed as a result of it? Do you have a testimony of how the Holy Spirit, the power of God, has touched you and your family? Did it meet your expectation? If not, why not?

Now on the last day, the great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, “If any man is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, From his innermost being (belly; i.e., hollow place) shall flow rivers of living water. But this He spoke of the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive (John 7:37-39).

Write and tell me your thoughts: judith@judithdoctor.com