The Holy Spirit, Neglected Person of the Trinity, and Women’s Leadership

Pam Morrison

Who is the Holy Spirit?

The entire Bible refers to the ministry of the Holy Spirit and to the triune nature of the God we worship; however, in the New Testament, the Holy Spirit’s influence moves from being for particular people at particular times, as in the Old Testament, to a pouring out on all flesh. The opening events of the Book of Acts lead us to the day of Pentecost and Peter’s interpretation of extraordinary happenings involving a room full of fervently praying, Christ-following men and women who become powerfully enabled by God. Through the prophecy of Joel, Peter interprets these events to a multinational crowd:

“In the last days,” God says, “I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.” (Acts 2:17–18)

As Joel prophesied, the “new thing” now available to both men and women is the Holy Spirit, promised to God’s new covenant people after the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. Jesus spoke more than once about “another One who would be coming.” From the gospel of John, we hear Jesus promise, “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever— the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you” (John 14:16–17). The Greek word in this passage is Parakletos, “one who is called alongside,” a comforter and advocate. Jesus speaks of this One as “another advocate,” Jesus’ representative, indicating that the “Holy Spirit is just like Jesus.”

Yet, we learn, as we study Scripture, that there is so much more to know about “this One.” The Holy Spirit is a person, not a force. “He thinks (Acts 15:28), speaks (Acts 1:16), leads (Rom. 8:14), and can be grieved (Eph. 4:30).” The Spirit is the Third Person of the Trinity, and is rightly called God the Spirit, for the Spirit is God. The Spirit’s gifts of perpetual guidance include counseling; comforting; teaching; power; conviction; quickened minds; sharpened faculties; a hunger for the Word, worship, and prayer; and many other heightened attributes. Our very desire to respond to Christ for salvation is initiated by the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3). We learn from various passages—Ephesians 4:11, Romans 12:3–8, and 1 Corinthians 12:8–10, 28–30—about gifts of the Spirit, charismata, made available to Christian believers. In Galatians 5:22–23, we learn that the fruit of the Spirit, holy character traits, are brought forth in us by the Spirit. The Spirit is our “seal” or “deposit,” a guarantee of life eternal now with God and of “something more” that is coming (2 Cor. 1:22).

The words of Jesus that we are to “love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12) represent a powerful command, but how can we ever begin to obey them—to love the least of these, turn the other cheek, walk the second mile, forgive our enemies, and so forth, in our own strength? We need something from beyond ourselves: more strength than we naturally possess. To lead others to an understanding of Christ and an opportunity to respond to him in the face of sometimes fierce opposition takes more strength than we naturally possess. As twentieth-century English pastor Samuel Chadwick once wrote, “The Christian religion is hopeless without the Holy Ghost.” In fact, Chadwick’s summation of the Spirit’s work and purposes and of the church and the individual believer’s need for the Spirit is quite powerful and thorough:

The resources of the Church are in “the supply of the Spirit.” The Spirit is more than merely the minister of consolation, the “Comforter.” He is Christ without the limitations of the flesh and the material world. He can reveal what Christ could not speak. He has resources of power greater than those Christ could use, . . . and He is the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Truth, the Spirit of Witness, the Spirit of Conviction, the Spirit of Power, the Spirit of Holiness, the Spirit of Life, the Spirit of Adoption, the Spirit of Help, the Spirit of Liberty, the Spirit of Wisdom, the Spirit of Revelation, the Spirit of Promise, the Spirit of Love, the Spirit of Meekness, the Spirit of Sound Mind, the Spirit of Grace, the Spirit of Glory, and the Spirit of Prophecy. It is for the Church to explore the resources of the Spirit. The resources of the world are futile. The resources of the Church within herself are inadequate. In the fullness of the Spirit there is an abundance of wisdom, resources, and power . . . .

Do we neglect the Holy Spirit?

Chadwick felt that we often have little faith in the power of the Spirit. While we may mention the Holy Ghost or Holy Spirit in creeds, baptismal formulas, benedictions, and prayers for “spiritual effect,” most Christians do not have a vital relationship with the Spirit. Too often, we trust in our human strength, insight, and intellectual powers rather than in our supernatural God. “The blunders and disasters of the Church are largely, if not entirely, accounted for by the neglect of the Spirit’s ministry and mission,” Chadwick wrote. He continued:

The Church has lost the note of authority, the secret of wisdom, and the gift of power through its persistent and willful neglect of the Holy Spirit of God. Confusion and impotence are inevitable when the wisdom and resources of the world are substituted for the presence and power of the Spirit of God.

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Chadwick discovered, in his own ministerial experience, the intimacy and the power that come from greater reverence for the Holy Spirit. He describes his transformation from an ambitious man consumed with gaining human praise to a humble man consumed with reaching hearts for Christ and building the kingdom of God:

One evening as he [Chadwick] was praying over his next sermon, a powerful sense of conviction settled on him. His pride, blindness, and reliance on human methods paraded before his eyes as God humbled him to the dust. Well into the night he wrestled and repented, then he got out his pile of precious sermons and set fire to them! The result was immediate: the Holy Spirit fell on him. In his own words: “I could not explain what had happened, but it was a bigger thing than I had ever known. There came into my soul a deep peace, a thrilling joy, and a new sense of power…”

He had been proud and self-sufficient up to this point, fussing over sermon manuscripts and wanting to be seen as able and accomplished in his own right, a learned man and an excellent speaker. After placing trust in the Holy Spirit, he preached with an effectiveness and vigor that came from beyond him, with full reliance on God. Now, his focus was on the needs of a lost humanity around him. Crowds grew bigger. Lives were truly changed.

In our neglect of the Spirit, the “letter kills”

Chadwick is not the only Christian who has discovered a quality of spiritual life and service that became vastly different after understanding and seeking the fullness of God through the Holy Spirit. That experience was shared by William Law, an eighteenth-century contemporary of John Wesley. In his book An Affectionate Address to the Clergy in 1761, which was brought back into print by Andrew Murray under its current title The Power of the Spirit, in 1896, William Law explains that repeatedly human beings not only allow, but also promote the formation of leaders who substitute their own teachings, traditions, rules, and achievements for God’s.

As Jesus observed of the scribes and Pharisees of his time, “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules,” (Matt. 15:8). The Apostle Paul cautioned that God “has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter, but of the Spirit; for the letter kills but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor. 3:6). Our Scriptures, “the letter,” are God-inspired for our good, of course, and are provided for “teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training” (2 Tim. 3:16), but, by themselves, without Spirit-quenching interpretation, the power to comprehend and to live them out, we can fall into legalism and dryness, into interpretations based upon wrong motives that do not give life. William Law expressed his concern this way:

Bible scholars are generally looked upon as having a divine knowledge when they are as ready at chapter and verse of Scripture as the learned philosopher is at every page of Plato or Aristotle. On the basis of a prescribed religious education, the clergyman is thought to be fully qualified to engage in that ministry for which the apostles had to receive an enduement of power from on high. This scholarly worship of the letter has greatly opposed the ministry of the Holy Spirit, and blinded men to the living reality which the gospel holds out to those who believe. The manner in which Greek and Hebrew scholarship is admired and sought after in the church would lead one to believe that a man has all the divine life and reality of a Paul if he can only say his epistles by heart. What could such a man truly be said to have, except the letter of the gospel without the Spirit? And what would be the advantage if he knew this letter in the original Greek, and had thoroughly mastered all the niceties of grammar and shades of ancient meanings? Such a man, while more thoroughly grounded in the letter, must remain just as empty of the reality of the gospel, unless he knows in his own experience the immediate inspiration and quickening power of the Holy Spirit.¹⁰

Not only did William Law, like Chadwick, see that Christianity could not begin to be lived out as intended without the Holy Spirit, but he actually saw something very sinister at work: “When this empty, powerless knowledge of the letter of spiritual truth is held to be the possession of the truth itself, then darkness, delusion, and death overshadow Christendom. For gospel Christianity is in its whole nature a ministration of the Spirit.…”¹¹ This was not a denial of the need for, or the credibility of, advanced theological education. It was simply the recognition that education must be balanced with a humble connection to God the Spirit. William Law also believed that there was not just indifference or neglect of the Spirit in his age, but an outright resistance to the Spirit of precisely the same ferocity as was shown to Jesus in his era. Thus, Law points out:

The Jews refused Him who was the substance and fulfilling of all that was taught in their Law and Prophets. The Christian church is in a fallen state for the same rejection of the Holy Spirit, who was given to be the power and fulfilling of all that was promised by the gospel. And just as the Pharisees’ rejection of Christ was under a profession of faith in the Messianic Scriptures, so church leaders today reject the demonstration and power of the Holy Spirit in the name of sound doctrine.¹²

Law was not proposing fanaticism, but simple biblical Christianity. He was concerned about neglect of the Spirit when the focus is on human wisdom, methods, and organization apart from the Spirit. Churches without the Spirit as “leader” can have misplaced priorities, neglecting the ministry and mission of Jesus in preference to inward-looking, self-serving projects. They can become places with much conflict and disunity, striving in competition with other Christian churches and denominations. Their congregants may not be truly converted or mature in the faith. Superficially, they may become attached to the Christian community with its programs and busyness while living lives that vary little from those of people “in the world.” In other words, holiness is not advanced. Sin continues to have a hold on the human heart and on behavior. But, there is another vital concern for egalitarians. When the Spirit as the sole source of gifting and power for effective ministry is not understood, women’s leadership in ministry may be suppressed. This is another great loss that occurs when the Holy Spirit is neglected or ignored. Churches, emphasizing the
“letter” only, as well as human achievement, institutional preservation, denominational polity, and so on, deny women, even those clearly divinely gifted to serve the God who has called them to be leaders. Susan Hyatt, in her book In The Spirit We’re Equal, observes, “Where the Holy Spirit is silenced, it appears that women are also silenced.”

Yet, the irony is that even in so-called “Spirit-sensitive” churches, pentecostal churches, those that came out of the revivals of the early years of the twentieth century, even there patriarchal environments and the suppression of women can occur, and did when their initial fervor in the Spirit waned. Hyatt notes the brevity of egalitarianism in many Spirit-emphasizing churches. She writes:

As the Pentecostal Revival spread and diversified, equality waned and women tended to return to their socially acceptable place as subordinate partner. As the Holy Spirit’s presence withered, the hierarchical social patterns of institutionalism, especially patriarchy, snuffed out the egalitarianism that had characterized the early revival period. The desire to be accepted by the larger society prompted a shift in values from the egalitarian, Spirit-empowered model to a model that determined human value and function on the basis of gender, education, economics, and social standing. [emphasis added]

Hyatt traces the general impact of this phenomenon as she delves in great depth into the rise and fall of favor for women in ministry throughout the two thousand–plus years of Christian history. Where Christianity has been in seasons of revival or reform “movements” have been at the fore, women have been included to some degree, even fully as equals, and have had considerable freedom, as in the Quaker movement of the 1600s. Where the institution of Christianity has been at the forefront and power has been at stake, women's leadership has been limited or eliminated, and debatable biblical, theological, and doctrinal justifications have been given for this suppression.

An argument for women’s leadership from the example of Spirit-filled men

The point has been made that one of the outcomes of honoring the Spirit is that women and men who are chosen by God to lead in Christian communities will be honored and allowed to carry out their ministries in freedom. Usually, the case for the legitimacy of women in ministry is made by pointing to a variety of women from the biblical record who were leaders: Deborah, Miriam, house church leaders in the New Testament, the women saluted at the end of Paul's letter to the Romans, and other examples. The Greek terms used to describe these women are analyzed and compared to terms used to describe similar male figures. In addition, countless women who have served fearlessly as missionaries, lay pastors, and evangelists, sometimes without legitimization by the Christian community, are also cited. This has all been presented by able and astute scholars through careful and excellent study of biblical texts and other historical sources. Yet, too often the Christian community returns to the “problematic” passages such as 1 Corinthians 14:34, 1 Timothy 2:12, and Ephesians 5:22–33. The exploration of the Greek word meanings in these passages, as well as the study of the cultural and historical contexts of this time, provide ample proof that these passages were not intended as a universal prohibition against women as leaders. Still, the battle over women's leadership in ministry wears on. It seems that no matter how many egalitarian arguments are made, some in the Christian community remain unconvinced. Even naming prophetesses (Miriam in Exod. 15:20; Philip's daughters in Acts 21:9), apostles (Junia in Rom. 16:7), praying and prophesying women (Paul's concern in 1 Cor. 11:5), and others whose actions indicate priestly and prophetic offices seems to have little impact. And, so, inequality continues in a world that desperately needs all of its workers to proclaim the gospel to its massive "vineyard" of souls.

Perhaps the case for releasing all Spirit-gifted Christian women into ministry should be made, then, from a different angle. By considering the heart and spirit of men who are greatly used by God, perhaps it can be demonstrated that their usefulness and fruitfulness have nothing to do with gender. What were the qualities in Christian men who are remembered for marvelous kingdom work that made them fruitful in ministry? Were these qualities connected to their gender, or not? There are so many biblical or historical figures who could be examined, but let us look at just one example from recent revival history.

Evan Roberts was a key figure in the Welsh revival of 1904–1905. Though many are credited with laying the groundwork for this vast movement of Christian renewal that took place in Wales, Roberts remains a key figure. It is intriguing to read how Roberts prepared for his ministry. Roberts had begun praying for his country thirteen years prior to the revival events that took place in 1904. He worked in the coal mines with his father and then as a blacksmith, but went off to study in preparation for ministry at age twenty-six. Attending prayer meetings at Blaenanerch near his school, he expressed the hunger for great outpourings of the Holy Spirit filling his heart, and it was not long before he sensed the call of God to return to his own village of Loughor to preach to the young people at his Moriah church. The meetings were held nightly and began slowly without much effect, but matters soon changed as the church became increasingly packed. Meetings with young people turned into fervent worship services lasting until all hours of the night, and the momentum of the revival began to spread throughout the Welsh countryside.

This Great Awakening in Wales is marvelous to study, but most impressive is the posture that Evan Roberts took before God and his own understanding about what makes the “climate” right for revival. Roberts would say, “If we could just bend a little lower, . . .” meaning that, with more humility and greater reverence, more of God could be present “in the house.” Roberts taught that confession, total forgiveness, complete obedience, and unabashed declaration of Christ as one’s Savior were the precursors of revival. He felt that, if he or anyone else, even for a moment, postured for the center of attention, the Spirit’s presence quickly would begin to recede. Consequently, he did not advertise or allow himself to
Christian leaders like F. B. Meyer, Gypsy Rodney Smith, G. Campbell Morgan, and General William Booth were also so impressed by Roberts that they took their cues from his behavior. Stewart notes, “These great men of God recognized the fact that this was not a revival come through great preachers nor through great preaching, but that it was a supernatural work altogether apart from either.” Stewart then describes the extraordinary social changes occurring in the wake of the heightened spiritual climate:

Many were the instances of men’s entering taverns, ordering drinks and then turning on their heels and leaving them untouched. Wales up to this time was in the grip of football fever when tens of thousands of working-class men thought and talked only of one thing. They also gambled the results of the games. Now the famous football players themselves got converted and joined the open-air street meetings to testify what glorious things the Lord had done for them. Beneath the ground the miners gathered for worship and Bible study before they dispersed to the various sections of the mines. Even the children in the schools came under the spell of God.

Conclusion

It was not greater physical strength, masculine rationality, or less emotional volatility that made Evan Roberts an extraordinary vessel so greatly used by God—traits that are often associated with men. I think it is easy to see that what made Roberts the leader he was came from his absolute reverence toward God as Spirit, his humility, his total surrender, his prayer, and his concern for the salvation of others. None of these spiritual traits is unique to being male. A woman can also possess this right heart posture before God. We can recall the great Amanda Berry Smith (1837–1915), a tremendous evangelist and Christian worker in her own right, traveling as far as India to do the work that God gave her to do. Yet, she was an American ex-slave, a Black facing down racism, a woman, poor, and one who had completed less than three months of formal education. She had literally nothing in terms of human accomplishment to recommend her. What she did have were the same traits possessed by Roberts: an absolute dependence upon the Holy Spirit and a hunger to be holy and useful. All effective leadership in the church begins at the point of the Holy Spirit’s gifting and empowerment. We must attend to the Spirit. From there, God’s power can work in each of us. Leadership qualification has little to do with our achievements and nothing to do with our gender. Useable people are those who are totally surrendered to God, and both men and women can choose that path.

Notes

1. Scriptures are taken from the TNIV.
2. Nicky Gumbel, Questions of Life (Colorado Springs, Co.: Cook Communications Ministries, 2003), 120.
3. Gumbel, Questions of Life, 120.
4. Gumbel, Questions of Life, 120.
15. Hyatt, In the Spirit We’re Equal, 220.
16. Hyatt, In the Spirit We’re Equal, 84, Hyatt describes the Quakers as “Spirit-oriented people—women interpreted the Scriptures and preached. Quaker men and women were equal partners in marriage.”
17. James Stewart, Invasion of Wales by the Spirit Th rough Evan Roberts (Asheville, N.C.: Revival Literature, 2004), 16.
19. Stewart, Invasion, 22.
20. Stewart, Invasion, 11.
21. Stewart, Invasion, 11.
22. Stewart, Invasion, 33–34.