

Is the Holy Spirit Too Weird for American Christianity?

If you're a Christian and you have a pulse, then you've heard about the latest dustup between conservative Christianity and the modern charismatic movement. In his most recent book, *Strange Fire*, noted cessationist John MacArthur accuses charismatics of everything from doctrinal heresy to just being plain weird. He often cites the worst cases and passes them off as the normative charismatic experience.

To be fair, I do think some of the excesses and abuses in the book warrant correction today. I must also say that I agree with some of what MacArthur and his surrogates teach about the Holy Spirit.

For instance, it's true that God wants our worship to be doctrinally sound (1 Tim. 1:3), intelligible (1 Cor. 14:19) and orderly (1 Cor. 14:27). We need to be reminded that the Spirit brings conviction of sin (John 16:8) and transforms our character (1 Cor. 13:1-7). MacArthur's emphases on these vital aspects of the Spirit aren't wrong.

But as I read, I wondered, "How is it that such a biblically educated believer can so blatantly and effortlessly screen out the supernatural content of Scripture?"

At worst, MacArthur just morphs Christianity into a mere doctrinal system—a checklist of sacred beliefs. At best, he portrays the Spirit as that silent member of the Trinity who is busy with the discreet work of inner transformation.

He doesn't speak to us. He doesn't lead us. And He has no interest in setting hearts, hands and lips ablaze with His presence. At least, not today anyway.

The Legacy of Radical Cessationism

Here's the problem with all this. More than a century of mere doctrinal inculcation has left us with a generation of believers who don't even believe in the doctrine of the Spirit anymore. It's counterintuitive, I know. But just consider this:

- The Barna Group found that most American Christians do not believe in the existence of the Holy Spirit.
- Barna also found that younger generations were less likely to believe in and engage with the Spirit.

These statistics are alarming when one considers the mass exodus of 18- to 34-year-olds from the church.

In effect, we have barred would-be **worshippers** from the fullness of the Spirit's experience while insisting that they learn the Apostles' Creed. But the Holy Spirit is not merely a doctrine we learn about. He's not a dove on a stained-glass window. And he's not the "silent member" of the Godhead. He is God himself—the God who has "invaded our lives with transforming presence," as Craig Keener puts it.

A diminished view of the Spirit's work is dangerous for several reasons.

First, minimizing the Spirit compromises biblical truth. The Spirit is instrumental in our personal rebirth and renewal (John 3:3, 5-8). He fills us as we gather and worship (Eph. 5:19). He also empowers us to meet our obligations through Spirit gifts (Rom. 12; 1 Cor. 12). The same power of the Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead is available to the believer (Eph. 1:19-20). The Christian faith is a lot of things, but it is nothing without the Spirit. We may engrave His name in the bedrock of our historic creeds, but without His presence, we are not of Christ at all.

Second, minimizing the Spirit will jettison our mandate. Christianity is not a nice family religion. It is a living, active and missional enterprise. If we make the mistake of

treating the Spirit as nothing more than a theological abstraction, an amorphous concept or the “silent partner” of the Trinity, we will utterly fail to disciple the nations and the next generation. This is why Jesus told the disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the promise—God’s empowering presence (Acts 1:4–8). Take the Holy Spirit away from the church and all we’re left with is a grace-deficient, family-based cult. Christianity doesn’t work when the Spirit is ignored, marginalized or sidelined in favor of our Spirit-less ingenuity.

We’re losing our culture to darkness. And Christianity cannot be seen as a credible option in a culture where it is reduced to a mere historic curiosity, devoid of wind and fire—absent the Spirit of life.

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