

Don't Fall for a Cheap Imitation of the Holy Spirit

What people think is the Holy Spirit is often a cheap imitation. Don't be deceived.

Pigeons and doves are in the same family and look much the same. But the pigeon is not the symbol of peace. It was not a pigeon that came down and remained on Jesus. The turtledove—symbolizing the Holy Spirit—is different from a pigeon in interesting ways.

My friend Pete Cantrell is an expert on pigeons and turtledoves. His observations have amused and gripped me. Their relevance to a study of the Holy Spirit is almost astonishing.

“Do you see that pigeon?” he once asked me. “Watch him, he’s getting ready to bully the pigeon next to him because it is perched on the spot he wants for himself.” Seconds later, I watched it happen.

“I don’t see that happening with turtledoves,” Pete added. “Doves don’t fight.”

It seems to me that many of the claims to the presence of the Dove among us are nothing but pigeon religion—a counterfeit for the Holy Spirit. In my own haste I have presumed the presence of God in my life many times—when it was not the Dove after all. Often it has been a pigeon—not the heavenly Dove—that gave me a “religious” feeling. Here’s how you can avoid making the same mistake.

Don't Be Fooled by Appearances

When one is preconditioned for a certain manifestation of the Holy Spirit, it is easy to presume the presence of the genuine

Holy Spirit when you see that particular manifestation. Take falling down and laughing as examples.

I happen to believe that the phenomena of falling down and laughing have been the authentic results of God's presence in some places. But when one attends a church where this happens a lot, it's likely that someone could easily fall to the floor after being prayed for and that there could be an entirely natural explanation for it.

Several years ago, because I was sitting on the front row, I felt compelled to come forward when the preacher asked all church leaders to line up for prayer in the front. I sincerely hoped that God would come down on me and do whatever He pleased. Seventy or 80 men and women were lined up ahead of me for prayer.

As the preacher prayed for each person, every one of them fell backward into the arms of the "catcher" waiting next in line. Then the preacher came to me. I stood there like the Statue of Liberty. Nothing happened.

He prayed again, then a third time. Had I closed my eyes and been less conscious of standing straight, I suspect I too would have fallen.

I felt sorry for the preacher and wanted to apologize for his embarrassment when I didn't fall. I wanted to go down—I promise you. But I didn't want to be pushed over by a pigeon!

I'm not saying that the Dove did not come down on some, if not all the other people in that line. But I believe that their expectancy was so high and the preconditioning so powerful that a pigeon could have done the same thing.

Pigeons may be present whenever God shows up in genuine Holy Spirit power. On one night there may be a most awesome sense of God's presence.

You may feel it in the worship, in the preaching and in the time of prayer ministry. People may be shedding tears of joy and repentance and laughing and crying. Scores may be converted and many healed.

You can't wait for the next night. That night the same worship group leads with the same songs and hymns. The same preacher takes his text from God's Word. But God chooses not to show up.

The important issue is this: Will the minister in charge have the integrity not to manipulate the people? Or will he feel that to be successful, that night's meeting must appear to be just like the meeting on the previous night? If he thinks that, it is likely he may practice pigeon religion in order to get the same results.

The genuine Dove is like the wind that blows "'wherever it pleases'" (John 3:8, NIV). If one is truly sensitive to the Spirit, he or she must flow with the Spirit as well. And if one is equally sensitive to His absence, that person will honor God's sovereignty and will not pretend.

It takes a lot of courage to yield to the Spirit when He comes in power. It takes equal courage to be unpretentious when He is absent. Both aspects of the Dove can threaten one's comfort zone.

There is nothing like a large crowd to counterfeit the presence of the Dove. A big group can create an expectant atmosphere. Nothing preconditions a leader or a congregation like a church that's filled with people.

If there is a lack of discernment and sensitivity to the person of the Spirit, which is needed all the more at such a time, a pigeon could come down on the heads of everyone present, and no one would know the difference. I fear this has happened many times—and to the best of people.

The initial similarity of appearance between a pigeon and the Dove can even produce a “bandwagon” effect—everyone becomes excited and wants to be “in” on what is happening. This can continue for some time. But eventually one wakes up and comes to terms with the sobering possibility that it was all hype. It hurts when you realize you were taken in and that there was a fleshly explanation for everything that happened.

This can happen at an individual level as well, whether it be through speaking in tongues or through prophetic words of knowledge. If we convince ourselves that God must manifest Himself, we will settle for almost anything.

It is almost as if one says, “Well, if I can’t have the Dove, I’ll take a pigeon.” But if we believe that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever, we ought not settle for the counterfeit.

Don’t Manipulate the Spirit

A pigeon can be domesticated, trained and manipulated. A pigeon can be easily controlled and made to conform. Not so with a turtledove.

Nor can the Spirit of God be easily manipulated or controlled: “‘The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going,’” (John 3:8). You cannot make the Holy Dove do anything—except when you make it fly away.

Feeling the need to control the Holy Spirit may be one of the greatest abuses of the Spirit. When we begin to feel we can control the will of the Holy Spirit, pigeon religion has moved in. Yet often we continue trying to convince ourselves that it must be the Dove.

The issue is control. Who’s in charge? Some people play with the Holy Spirit as if He has no will of His own.

We can fall prey to this when we are praying alone by attempting to do all the talking—thus quenching the Spirit. Or we can read the Bible and do all the thinking. In this way, the Dove does not have a chance to slip in.

The same can happen with public leadership. A powerful leader (even a worship leader or preacher) can sometimes control a crowd with his or her gift and personality. The people out there may not have a clue they are being manipulated.

The problem lies in the fact that one's gift is, in a sense, also one's anointing. God shapes each gift and personality for His glory.

However, not everything that someone with an anointed gift does is Spirit-led. We are under a solemn obligation to follow—not lead—the Holy Spirit. I may have an anointing to teach and preach, but I can get ahead of the Lord. When I do, pigeon religion takes over because I am in control.

Some years ago I talked with a worship leader about his style of leading worship. He admitted he had a gift that enabled him to control an audience.

He could make them do almost anything—clap, jump, sit or weep. When he did this, the people never knew they had been conditioned for a certain response in much the same way pigeons are trained to perform a particular behavior. It is an exceedingly rare worship leader who is utterly sensitive to the Dove and does not get ahead of the Lord.

Pigeon religion is man in control. It is manipulative, usurping the place of the Dove.

The gracious Spirit is gentle and prudent. Like the meek and lowly Jesus, the Dove is neither intrusive (coming when not invited) nor obtrusive (unpleasantly noticeable). He is self-effacing. When He is invited and accepts the invitation, the result takes man out of the picture.

When the Spirit is present, people want to wait on the Spirit. They want to worship, and they let the Spirit do the leading. When this happens, it is an unforgettable experience—one worth waiting for.

The Spirit will not be manipulated. The Dove flutters away as soon as one tries to do this, and the pigeon comes in.

Don't Be Territorial

A pigeon thinks a certain place belongs to him. Pigeon religion is manifested when one instinctively feels he or she has a “corner” on the anointing. This happens when we take ourselves too seriously.

It also happens when we decide we own the franchise on God's enterprise in a particular theological or geographic area. As a result, we struggle against someone else “elbowing in” on our calling, area of expertise or following.

This is a party spirit, a rival or competitive spirit. Because we uphold a particular emphasis, we want to be the sole vanguard for the “party line.”

Nothing is more deadly than a rival spirit in the church of God. Take the subject of revival, for example. I think we all agree that there is a heart cry for revival today. I doubt there is any evangelical group or church that is not praying for revival—a sovereign outpouring of God's Spirit that will revive the people of God and result in many conversions.

The problem is, we all want it to come to us! We all tend to see ourselves as having “borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day” (Matt. 20:12). We resent it if God makes others “equal to us”! We want God to bless our efforts, our party line and our denomination.

Therefore we tend to dismiss any report of God's coming down powerfully on anyone but us. We honestly believe it couldn't

happen to those who are of a different theological persuasion or ecclesiastical setting.

Not long ago a weekly prayer meeting on the second floor of a civic center in Nairobi, Kenya, centered on revival. A group of a dozen Western missionaries prayed earnestly that God would send revival to Nairobi.

At exactly the same time, 700 Kenyans were praying noisily and worshiping God—and growing rapidly—in the large auditorium just beneath the group of Western missionaries. The irony is, God was answering the missionaries' prayers!

But they could not bring themselves to recognize revival under their noses—for the Kenyans below them didn't represent their party line. Another example of pigeon religion!

None of us has a monopoly on the anointing. Jesus' disciples wanted to stop someone praying in Jesus' name "'because he is not one of us'" (Luke 9:49-50). Jesus stepped in, admonishing, "'Do not stop whoever is not against you is for you.'"

Even Joshua, when he was young and still had a lot to learn, was unhappy when certain people were prophesying without recognized credentials. "But Moses replied: 'Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!'" (Num. 11:29). That is the way God would have us all to reject pigeon religion and pray for the restoration of His honor in the world (rather than just in our own ministries).

The Spirit will do His work—if we don't get in the way. We must not step in where we don't belong or elbow in on the Spirit's territory. For the Spirit to be able to do His work, we must simply be the channel through which He works. If we try to do what He does best, He flutters away.

You may think you are incapable of being deceived by a pigeon. But all of us are as capable of following pigeon religion as

we are of following the Holy Dove.

Simon Peter was being led by the Dove when he said to Jesus, “‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God’” (Matt. 16:16). Yet just a few verses later Jesus turned and said to Peter: “‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men’” (v. 23).

Our best guarantee against following pigeon religion is an ever-increasing sensitivity to the Dove.

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