

The Holy Spirit of Signs and Wonders Is Also the Spirit of Righteousness

We live in a self-obsessed age. But one of the great characteristics of Christianity is that personal, spiritual renewal is ultimately always about the world we're living in and not just our own individual lives.

This is a lesson of the charismatic renewal a century ago which we must pass along to a new generation.

In the spring of 1906, a series of revivals erupted in a neighborhood of Los Angeles. People spoke in tongues; miracles took place and many reported experiencing the power of the Holy Spirit. At the center of it all was the great African-American preacher William Seymour.

Today millions of Christians trace the history of their faith back to those days in that Los Angeles neighborhood. Known as the Azusa Street Revival, this revival—along with other similar events in Asia, Europe and Latin America—ignited the charismatic and Pentecostal movement, which today numbers more than 630 million people.

As an unapologetic, self-confessed charismatic bishop from India, I believe global Christianity owes an enormous debt to the pioneers of the Pentecostal and charismatic movement. The movement brought into sharp focus how the physical, emotional and spiritual needs are met by a baptism or filling of the Spirit. It insisted that the Spirit of God is present in our world and that we can expect to see His manifestations in our lives.

This was a much-needed reform. Christianity, under the influence of modernism, had grown to dismiss the experiential

dimensions of the kingdom of God and the holistic needs of the human person. Modernism had turned rationalism into the new deity, a point argued and developed well by the late, great scholar of ancient Christianity, Thomas Oden. In effect, the church had moved toward belief in an absentee God and had missed the present, vibrant and living nature of the gospel of the kingdom of God. Because of this the charismatic movement has been particularly effective in the global south, where the spirit world is as real as the physical world.

As I have watched this movement over the past four decades, I have wondered whether at times it has overlooked the call of justice and righteousness in the gospel of the kingdom of God. Of course, charismatics and Pentecostals emphasize that divine power and gifts are available to meet present human needs. But the gospel's call for justice and righteousness goes beyond personal renewal, healing or deliverance.

Much of the human pain and tragedy happens because of structures of oppression, exploitation and destruction. While people may find personal deliverance from afflictions, these human-made structures perpetuate injustice and suffering.

The work of justice is as old as the creation story. When God spoke of Abel's blood crying out, it was for justice. When God empowered Moses to deliver the Israelites from bondage in Egypt, it was for justice. Throughout the Old Testament, God raised prophets and leaders who confronted evil and stood for the poor, afflicted and oppressed. Putting the world to right is in the heart of God's plan for redemption.

Jesus picked up this thread in the Beatitudes when He said blessed are those who thirst for righteousness. He was speaking not only of personal righteousness but righteousness in the world. The Beatitudes promise the satisfaction of this thirst and this is possible through a Spirit baptism of righteousness, or justice.

The good news is that the answer to confronting the forces of evil and social sin in our world is the same mighty baptism of the Spirit. The Spirit is the God of truth, compassion and righteousness. He is the author and initiator of all efforts of justice and reconciliation.

However, the work of justice needs enormous courage, conviction and ability to withstand evil. We see this in God's greatest act of reconciliation: Jesus' death and Resurrection. It should not surprise us then that Jesus warned us of persecution—not just because of people experiencing personal renewal but because His followers would oppose systems of oppression and injustice.

Christianity has a long, rich history of brave believers doing this. For example, Archbishop Oscar Romero challenged the bloody dictatorship in El Salvador and paid for it with his life. Dietrich Bonhoeffer decried the evil of Hitler and the Nazi party in Germany, and he too was killed for it. Martin Luther King Jr. also was killed by someone who opposed his march for justice, which King believed came from the scriptures and the power of the Spirit.

A religion only about self-renewal will not impact the world. A religion about the renewal of our neighbor—the oppressed, the victimized, the poor and those who suffer persistent injustice in an unjust world—will change the world.

God still wants to empower His people with His Spirit today to continue this work of righteousness. We must ask ourselves what our role should be when we witness injustice and oppression. Are we praying for the war in Ukraine? Not only that, are we holding those responsible for suffering—whether President Vladimir Putin or the Russian Orthodox Church in its complicity—to account for the wanton killing of innocent civilians, pregnant women and children?

We need to remember that we work and live in the Spirit of

power and not powerlessness. He is more than able to bring an end to this war and ensure justice, righteousness and reconciliation flourish even in the bleakest situations. {eoa}

Archbishop Joseph D'Souza is an internationally renowned human and civil rights activist. He is the founder of Dignity Freedom Network, an organization that advocates for and delivers humanitarian aid to the marginalized and outcasts of South Asia. He is archbishop of the Anglican Good Shepherd Church of India and serves as the president of the All India Christian Council.

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