

Toronto Blessing

or

*Temples of the Holy Spirit?*¹

by

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Not too far from here, in the vicinity of the Toronto International Airport, a certain church of about 350 people has drawn no fewer than about 200,000 visitors from many countries and denominations. For a while this Airport Vineyard Christian Fellowship had services six nights a week, and you would line up for two hours in order to get in. What was the attraction? About a year ago, it is said, the congregation began to experience bizarre manifestations of the “outpouring of the Holy Spirit.” People were “slain in the Spirit” and thus unable to continue standing. There are pictures of people laying on the ground, laughing uncontrollably, shaking, bouncing, roaring. And it is all believed to be a renewing encounter with God.²

¹ *The following is a slightly revised version of a speech delivered at the recent Easter Young People’s Study Weekend in Burlington in the spring of 1995. It was published in Clarion Vol. 44, No. 11. (June 2, 1995), 253-256.*

² See the March/April 1995 issue of *Faith Today: Canada’s Evangelical News/Feature Magazine*.

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Now it is not my intention to critique at length this particular church or what it's promoting, as sceptical as I am about it. Rather, the point of concern is the question: what is it that draws the people? It seems to be: this conviction that if the Spirit of God is living and working among the people of God, *the evidence should be visible and obvious and evident*. That is what is drawing the crowd, and leading to the line ups and the traffic jams.

And so when our topic is about being “Temples of the Holy Spirit,” perhaps it is good to highlight exactly this question: *whether the fact that you and I are temples of the Holy Spirit is sufficiently making a difference in your life and my life*. The questions are many: why should the presence of the Spirit make a difference? What should the differences be? Are they dramatic? Do we all have to be “slain in the Spirit”? Are they less dramatic? What are they?

A. BIBLICAL EXPOSITION

Temple

Obviously, one cannot talk about “temples of the Holy Spirit” without having some knowledge about the background of those words. Behind this phrase there is first of all a very rich Old Testament background.

It begins with a *tent*. Back in the days of Moses when the people of Israel traveled to the promised land, they were in the habit of pitching a certain tent in the midst of their camp. This tent had two inner rooms with some furnishings, a yard outside with a kind of a stove where meat could be roasted. In itself, this was not what made it special either for is it not possible that many of their own tents too had rooms inside and a fireplace outside? No, what made it special was the awareness

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that in this tent lived the Lord God of Israel. He dwelt here. And it was here that they could meet Him from time to time (Ex.25:8,22). Therefore the tent was also covered with gold and blue, symbolizing that the one who lived there was majestic and beautiful. The tent there in the midst of the people of God was a beautiful symbol of the solidarity between God and His people. This God would not simply remain in heaven and let Israel go on its way through the wilderness. No, He went with them. If they would live in tents, He would live in tents. When they picked up theirs, they picked up His. They were going to the promised land. He too would travel to the promised land. The reminder of His presence was also there in the cloud that came over the tent — the cloud which would go before them by day with the fire which was in it by night. A constant reminder, was it not, that the holy God dwelled in their midst (Ex.40:34-38; Num.9:15-23)!

But realize too: all the while, God reminded them that having Him in their midst had to make *a difference*. For this God was a holy God! Think of the book of Leviticus. What does this book deal with other than the fact that God dwells in the midst of His people? Now that the tabernacle was among the people of God, sacrifices had to be instituted so that the people of God could have access to His presence (Leviticus 1-5). Priests had to be given instructions as their role (Lev. 6-10, 21-22). The people as a whole had to keep separate from uncleanness in order to approach the tabernacle (11-16). They were warned that gross indecencies would meet with severe penalties (17-20). In addition, special care had to be taken for holy days and holy seasons and holy things (23-27). The point is: *the presence of God must make a difference*. The people of God are not to presume that they can have this holy God dwelling in their midst without it affecting their ways and their lives. Leviticus sums it up with the words: “Be holy because I,

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the Lord your God, am holy”(19:2; cf. 1 Peter 1:16).³ The simple fact is: the people of God cannot survive alongside the tabernacle unless they respect the holiness of God and maintain holiness among themselves.

It would be interesting, as a matter of fact, to trace this theme throughout the Old Testament. Time prevents us from saying much about it, but is it not clear: when the people of God live in this awareness — that it truly is a great blessing and a high privilege to have the holy God living among them — then they are strong and they are blessed. Later the people reach the promised land and they exchange their temporary tents for more permanent homes. It is fitting then that the makeshift tent of the Lord also be exchanged for the more stable edifice of a temple. Solomon does what David desired: making God a permanent temple to dwell in (2 Samuel 7). But clearly, *how the people relate to that temple and the God who dwells there is what determines the rise and fall of Israel*. Thus, we see our theme already in the Old Testament: the presence of the Lord *must* make a difference. If a holy God dwells in the midst of a people, holiness must characterize those people. If it does, blessings result. If it doesn't, fearful consequences follow.

Christ Tabernacles Among Us

Before we move on to that New Testament expression “temples of the Holy Spirit,” we must take one more brief stop on our journey through the Scriptures. And that is in order to pause and reflect on the fact that *the tabernacle and the temple find their fulfillment in our Lord Jesus Christ*. The clearest expression of this is in John 1:14, where John says: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth;

³ Vern Poythress, *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses* (Brentwood: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991) 41-2, 11-12.

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we have beheld his glory....”; when John says “*and dwelt among us,*” he deliberately uses a word for dwelling that alludes to the Old Testament tabernacle: “the word became flesh and *tabernacled* among us....”. Less clear perhaps but with the same basic point, Matthew calls Jesus “*Immanuel*” — God with us! Thus again, the point is that God dwells in the midst of the people of God. So too, in John’s Gospel, we hear our Lord saying as He stands in the temple building: “*Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up*” (2:19). When the Jews then take offense because they think he’s speaking about the building of the temple, John adds: “he spoke of the temple of his body.” The clear meaning of it all is: just as God dwelt in the tabernacle and temple in the Old Testament era, when our Lord Jesus Christ walks upon the face of the earth, God is dwelling in Him. *He is the dwelling place of God.* God is present in Israel. Again, it must have consequences. Lives must change. *Holiness must become the result.* Again it will be either blessing or curse for the people of God. The decisive question for Jew and Gentile is whether they behold the glory of God in Him (John 1:14), whether they recognize the Father dwelling in the Son (John 14:11).

Temple of the Holy Spirit

And what then happens when our Lord Jesus ascends into heaven? Is that the end of the matter? Certainly not. The clear teaching of Scripture is that at Pentecost — what is happening there? Our Lord Jesus Christ is sending forth His Holy Spirit (Acts 2:33) and the result of that is that the people of God now become the dwelling place of God. It is a climax in biblical history. God no longer dwells in the midst of the people of God in a tent or a building somewhere; God does not even dwell among them in one single person, but God dwells right there in the very people of God themselves. The coming of the

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Spirit of God in the hearts of believers makes them temples in a full and rich sense.

When we look at the Biblical data, it is clear: *the church of Jesus Christ is the temple of God, the temple of the Holy Spirit.* 1 Corinthians 3:16 and 17 is a reference not to the individual believer but to the church; it is evident from that fact that in the original the “you” is plural: “Do you not know that *you are God's temple* and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If any one destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and that temple you are.” Similarly in Ephesians 2:21,22, Paul speaks about the people of God growing into “a *holy temple* in the Lord; in whom you also are built into... for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.” Likewise 1 Peter 2:5 urges us “like living stones be yourselves built into a *spiritual house*....” Another text: 2 Corinthians 6:16: “...for we are the *temple* of the living God...” Yet another, Hebrews 3:6: “*we are [God's] house* if we hold fast our confidence and pride in our hope.”

And that which is true of the church is also true of the individual member of the church. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:16, using the singular and referring to the body of the believer: “Do you not know that *your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you*, which you have from God?” Likewise, Galatians 4:6: “*God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts*...”

So this is an indisputable fact. Christians are temples of the Holy Spirit. Anyone who truly professes the Son has the Spirit of God living in him or her. It is a climax in redemptive history. It is better than having God dwell in a building close by. It is better than having God dwell in one person. God dwells in each one of us! Talk about a high honor, a great privilege...God has come that near to us in Christ Jesus our Lord!!

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B. CONSEQUENCES

And so *the* question really becomes: if this had consequences for the people of Israel, if this had consequences in Jesus' day, should it not have *consequences* among us, the New Testament people of God? What difference should this make among us today?

Let us try to outline several principles in this regard.

More Fit for Life in God's World

First, we need to be aware *that the goal of the work of the Holy Spirit is to make us more and not less fit for life in God's world.* The point is: when you take a look at the Toronto blessing and similar phenomena, you would think that it is desirable that God's Spirit produce in us some kind of state of intoxication and confusion in which people lose their inhibitions and self-control to such an extent that peculiar behavior is the result: shaking, groaning, shrieking, clapping, stamping their feet, laughing uncontrollably, rolling on the floor, and even mindless imitation of bird and animals sounds.⁴ It would be better to ask: of what benefit might this kind of madness be? Is it not rather peculiar: the Spirit of God is involved in the work of creation (Gen.1:2). The Spirit is also the one who comes to put the finishing touches on the work of the Father and the Son. Is this madness really the finishing touch? Is this really the summit of spirituality? Our Lord Jesus Christ once said about false prophets: "*You will know them by their fruits*"(Mt. 7:15). Later he said: "*...false Christs and false prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect.*" It's not my desire to condemn anyone. All I

⁴ Richard D. Holliday, "Spiritual Mediocrity," *Faith Today*, 27.

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want to show is that these fruits leave great and serious questions.

But the point is: does the Scriptures not say that the Spirit of God directs us in exactly the opposite way? One of the fruits of the Spirit, says Paul is precisely “...*self-control*...” (Gal. 5:22) — not the opposite. The Spirit of God does not make us *less fit* for life in this world, but *more fit*. Drunkenness and the filling of the Spirit are opposites. Peter says on the day of Pentecost: “*these men are not drunk...*” (Acts 2:15). Paul says: “*do not get drunk with wine...but be filled with the Spirit*” (Eph. 5:18). It is true is it not: rather than over-riding men’s capabilities, the filling of the Spirit sharpens our minds, strengthens our self-control and disciplines our emotions.⁵ The effect of the Spirit within us is not that the quality of our minds is reduced or eliminated, but rather the “*renewal of our minds*” (Rom. 12:2; Eph. 4:23), and that we even receive “*the mind of Christ*” (1 Cor. 2:16). After Paul speaks in Ephesians 5 about being “filled with the Spirit” - he goes on to describe what some of the results of that might be: “*addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, always and for everything giving thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father.*” Does that sound like less self-control or more? The Greek construction of the next verses even suggests that another result of being filled with the Spirit is that in the Christian family, husbands, wives, children, fathers, slaves and masters begin to subject themselves to each other. Harmony in the home. Again the Spirit makes us *more fit* for life in this world and not less.

More fit for Life as God’s Children

⁵ Donald MacLeod, *The Spirit of Promise* (Christian Focus Publications, 1986), 87.

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In this regard, it is good to be reminded ***that the Spirit who dwells within us is “the Spirit of sonship.”*** Along the lines of our first principle, the point is that God gives us his Spirit not only to make us more fit for life in this world, but precisely more fit *as sons and daughters of God*. Paul uses the phrase “Spirit of sonship” in Romans 8 and it is no accident that it is there. This may very well be the point of that great chapter of Holy Scripture. We become sons and daughters of God, but how will we live as such sons and daughters? Will this remain of itself? Through thick and thin, persecutions and trials, will the children of God just continue on that path that God has placed them on? Certainly not. The whole Old Testament era and its repeated failure is a testimony to the fact that it won’t happen that way. But what is new in the era in which we now live is that the Spirit of God has come to live in the hearts and lives of people. And what is He doing there? Why does He make our bodies His temple? Because *one of His greatest purposes is to make us better sons and daughters of God*. Romans 8 is telling us that he helps us fight the flesh so that we are obedient sons and daughters eager to do the will of God, free from the dominance of sin (1-14). He comes alongside of us, drives away the doubt, and assures us that we are indeed sons and daughters of God (15-17). And He helps us when that life is threatened. When there is suffering He points us to the glory that is coming and the great hope of the glorious liberty of the children of God (17-25). He is even busy keeping the conversation going between the children of God and the Father; when we do not know how to pray, he himself intercedes for us (26-27). God is using Him to conform us to the image of His Son and bring us all to the goal of an eternity in the presence of the Triune God (28-39). This is the work of the Spirit — to prepare us for that great goal and help us reach it!

More Glory to Christ

Along that line it is good to remember as well that that besides being the spirit of our sonship, *the Spirit is always the Spirit of the Son*. Our Lord Jesus Christ speaks in John's Gospel about how He is the One who sends His Spirit to us. And what is His goal? His goal is not to serve Himself, but to point to the Lord Jesus and direct people in a deep and effective way to Christ. "He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak...*He will take what is mine and declare it to you*". "He will bring to your remembrance all that *I* have said to you"(14:26). Nor is it so that the Spirit will maybe be after His own glory and His own power; no, Jesus says: "He will glorify Me, for He will take what is mine and declare it to you" (16:14).

There is, therefore, a sense in which longing for all kinds of outward signs and wonders — along the lines of the Toronto blessing — is really quite misguided. For the focus of the Spirit's work is not to glorify me or you. The goal is not even the various gifts that He gives, nor to produce in us some kind of new "high." Rather, the goal of His presence in us and His work in us is: *Jesus Christ*. His intention is to bring us to Christ, to make us more *Christlike*, to make us more submissive to Christ as our Lord and our Master. It has often been said that the Holy Spirit is the more shy and faceless of the three persons of the Trinity. He does not call attention to Himself. He calls attention to the Son that people might know the Father. His mission is to make us call God "Father" and Jesus "Lord." Most of the time we don't even notice His presence — He works so quietly and wondrously in us, trying to get us to glorify Christ more and more with our lives.

James Packer speaks about the Spirit as having a *floodlight ministry*.⁶ It is a good illustration. For you see,

⁶ *Keep in Step with the Spirit* (Old Tappan: Fleming H. Revell, 1984) 65-6.

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when the floodlighting of a building is done carefully and rightly, then you will not even notice where the light comes from. It will be hidden in the grass or in the bushes. The accent is on the building with all its beautiful aspects and fine features against the background of the darkness. So it goes too with the Spirit of Christ. You hardly even notice Him. The Spirit's message to us is never "Look at me; listen to me; come to me; get to know me." The floodlight is not even pointing on you, on the new gifts you have, or the like, but rather it is always: "Look at Christ, and see His glory; listen to Him, and hear His word; go to Him and have life; get to know Him and taste His gift of joy and peace." You see it strikingly already at the very beginning. At Pentecost, Peter is full of the Spirit and is going to preach. What does he preach about? The Spirit? No, the Spirit leads him so that from beginning to end that Pentecost sermon is a sermon about Christ. The Spirit, He pats Peter on the back and He says: "yes, Peter, speak about Christ, and about Christ, and about Christ." So it is always. The Spirit focuses all the attention not on you nor on me nor on Himself but upon *Christ*, in all His greatness and beauty, power and majesty. And so the thing to ask when others make bold claims about the gifts they have and the wonders they perform is also: *who* is being glorified here? Man? People? Human experience? Or the person and the work of Christ? On whom is the spotlight shining?

More Holiness among the People of God

And so there is a fourth principle here, and that is that *the presence of the Holy Spirit within us calls us to holiness*. This is so, no doubt, for a number of reasons.

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It is so *because the Spirit is a **holy** Spirit*. Surely therefore if we are temples of the *holy* Spirit but meanwhile engage in acts of unholiness and ungodliness, it will have disastrous consequences.

It is so *because the Holy Spirit is a **person***. We will benefit, no doubt, from the awareness that the Spirit is a person with a whole breadth of emotions and feelings. The Scripture says that He is a person whom we can grieve (Eph.4:30), outrage (Heb. 10:29), and sin against to our own destruction (Mt. 12:32). He has a mind (1 Cor. 2:10,11), and a will (1 Cor. 12:11). There is nothing automatic here. It is possible for him to be so disgusted with us that he departs from our presence. The need for us to be *filled* with him is an on-going one (Eph. 5:18) which needs to be repeated often in the Christian life (cf. re Peter, Acts 4:8; 4:31; re Paul, Acts 9:17; 13:9). Our relationship is a dynamic one. Nothing is to be taken for granted. Hebrews even warns covenant children that it is possible for them to have been “partakers of the Holy Spirit” and yet to commit apostasy and fall away (6:4-6; cf. 10:29).

But at bottom, the presence of the Holy Spirit within us calls us to holiness *because the significance of this is that God Himself is living **in us***. What do you think? If the presence of God dwelling in a tent in the Israelite camp had to make a difference, must not the presence of God in our hearts? Paul says in 2 Corinthians 6: “we are the *temple* of the living God.” Thereafter he quotes from Leviticus 26: “I will live in them and move among them....” and from Isaiah 52 “therefore come out...be separate...touch nothing unclean...”. And then Paul draws more consequences - 2 Corinthians 7:1,2: “*Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, and make holiness perfect in the fear of God.*”

What we desperately need is the kind of response Isaiah had when he saw the Lord sitting upon a throne surrounded by

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the seraphim crying out “holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts”(6:3). Then Isaiah’s response was a sense of awe, a realization of unworthiness, and a deep understanding that this called for holiness. If that’s true of Isaiah who saw God with his eyes, how much more true is it not for you and me in whom Father, Son and Holy Spirit even dwell!? Then there must be results far more *supernatural*, far more *wondrous*, and far more *far-reaching* than those few bizarre signs experienced over there in Toronto. If the holy God has not just talked to us, exposing Himself to our eyes and ears, but *even dwells within us*, our lives, our speech, our walk — everything surely must change! There may not be one area of our lives which does not experience re-evaluation and renewal.

Think about it. How would you speak and act if you were in the presence of Prime Minister of Canada, or the Queen or whoever? Pick your most respected person. Would being in his or her presence not affect your speech, your attitude, and anything else? Well, we are not just in the presence of the holy God. *The presence of the holy God is in us; should it not affect how we think, relate, talk, walk?* Before Him nothing is hidden; our lives are open and bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do (Heb. 4:13).

It really has more effects than we can possibly enumerate. But let us try to single out some.

The presence of the Holy Spirit within us should affect our *lifestyle*, is it not? A pertinent question about the *music* we listen to may very well be: is this assisting us live lives of service to the praise and the glory of God? Does it reflect the work of the Spirit who makes us *more fit* for lives in His kingdom and His world, or is it more characteristic of the evil one who wants to turn order into chaos and turn us against holiness and every good thing? There is an approach to life out there which is basically atheistic and nihilistic. It is saying: life is crazy, void of all meaning and significance. This attitude to life is then reflected in the music they listen to, in the clothing

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they wear, and in mind-altering drugs. But the approach of the child of God is different. Knowing who *God* is, he knows who *he* is. Being the dwelling place of God in the spirit, he knows: life is not crazy. It makes sense in Christ. It is livable through the Spirit. It has its purpose in God. And so this child of God makes different choices in music, in clothing, in everything.

The presence of the Holy Spirit within us should affect the whole area of *sexuality*, should it not? Paul makes that connection in 1 Corinthians 6. If my body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, he says, if my body is for the Lord, and even has an eternal purpose in the resurrection, then I must be careful not to use it for purposes of immorality. But I must use it for the purpose of glorifying God. The number one reason why the child of God will stay away from premarital sex and all illicit forms of sexuality is not because young ladies get pregnant, it is not even because of Aids or other communicable diseases. It is not even because this is no way to start a wholesome relationship. The number one reason is: *communicable unholiness*. Our bodies are lifted up to a great status in Christ; they are members of Christ. They are temples of the Holy Spirit. But as in the old covenant, so in the new covenant: it is a disastrous thing to defile a temple.

Even areas of *health* are affected here therefore. If this body of mine has been elevated in such a way that it is much more than just some carcass in which I live and function, if it is a limb of Christ's body, a dwelling place of God, if it has a purpose in creation, in redemption, and even in the final recreation, then surely I must take care of it. Issues regarding drinking, smoking, recreation and the like must be dealt with in this light. It must therefore be a Christian thing to be health conscious. Not that sports must become a god; for God is god, and sports must remain what he has made them to be — one of his gifts to be enjoyed as such and for His glory. But given all we know today about *smoking*, e.g., and the effects it has on our bodies, it surely is not wrong anymore to say that smoking is

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contrary to the will of the Lord. It disregards the significance God has given to our bodies. It is an obvious way in which we flagrantly dare to thumb our noses at the sixth commandment. It is a waste of our financial resources in more ways than one. It will have its affects on our physical lives as well as our spiritual lives.

At bottom, the issues have to do with *spirituality*. If God has revealed Himself so wondrously in His Son through His Spirit, it goes without saying that you and I must continue to cultivate our relationships with Him. It means: my life must know of moments of silence and solitude wherein God speaks to me in His Word and I converse with Him in prayer. If the great privilege of a relationship has been established with God through Christ, then surely here it must go as it goes with all relationships: there must be communication and conversation. Searching the Word in corporate, family, and private worship, must never be merely for the acquisition of factual knowledge; it must be for the purpose of continued growth in godliness and holiness. It must lead to deepening fellowship with the God who even dwells within us. Through “the Spirit of wisdom and revelation,” I must come to “know him better” (Eph. 1:17, NIV).

To put it popularly, we must come to the realization that life cannot be lived Peter-Pan style. Many will know what my kids have reminded me about — Peter Pan is the boy in the fairy tales who never grows up. He lives in “never-never land” where no one grows and nothing changes. In another of his books, James Packer speaks about “the Peter Pan culture” that is developing in our age. He says: “Today’s world is full of people with adult bodies housing a juvenile, even infantile, emotional make-up — people, in other words, who just always want to be little boys or girls and to have fun.”⁷

⁷ *Rediscovering Holiness* (Ann Arbor: Servant Publications, 1992), 198-9.

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But real Christians do not live Peter Pan style. They grow up. They mature in Christ, reaching “the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ”(Eph. 4:13). They are aware of the fact that they, who are temples of the Holy Spirit, are on a journey — a journey to the city which is holy even though it has no temple, for “its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb”(Rev. 21:22). The greatest joy of that place will not be enjoying the pleasures of the new heaven and the new earth. It will not be the new opportunities for us to “have fun.” The supreme joy will be to enjoy the *God* who will dwell with them for ever and ever.

In the expectation of that eternal fellowship, the child of God grows in fellowship day by day. Longing for that fellowship then, he enjoys it already now. For now already he is a temple of the Holy Spirit and that must change everything.