

The Holy Spirit in the traditions of the Presbyterian Church – A reflection

The Great Commission

A mountain can be described from different perspectives, sounds similar but in some ways different. The life of Jesus in the Gospels is much the same. Different perspectives of the same life. A fuller understanding of His life can come from looking at all four of the gospels. Like wise the great Commission as we read it in a composite reading from all four Gospels and Acts.

And he said, “Yes, it was written long ago that the Messiah must suffer and die and rise again from the dead on the third day.

⁴⁸ You are witnesses of all these things.

He spoke to them and said, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

²² Then he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive anyone’s sins, they are forgiven. If you refuse to forgive them, they are unforgiven.”

“I have been given complete authority in heaven and on earth.

⁴⁷ With my authority, take this message of repentance to all the nations, beginning in Jerusalem:

‘There is forgiveness of sins for all who turn to Me.’

¹⁶ Anyone who believes and is baptised will be saved. But anyone who refuses to believe will be condemned. ¹⁷ These signs will accompany those who believe: they will cast out demons in My name, and they will speak new languages. ¹⁸ They will be able to handle snakes with safety, and if they drink anything poisonous, it won’t hurt them. They will be able to place their hands on the sick and heal them.”

¹⁹ Therefore, go and make disciples (alt: as you go, make disciples) of all the nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

²⁰ Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

⁴⁹ “And now I will send the Holy Spirit, just as My Father promised. But stay here in the city until the Holy Spirit comes and fills you with power from heaven.”

⁴⁵ John baptised with water, but in just a few days you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.”

⁸ When the Holy Spirit has come upon you, you will receive power and will tell people about Me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

¹⁹ When the Lord Jesus had finished talking with them, he was taken up into heaven and sat down in the place of honour at God’s right hand. ²⁰ And the disciples went everywhere and preached, and the Lord worked with them, confirming what they said by many miraculous signs.

Matt.28: 18-20, Mark 16:15-20, Luke 24:46-49, John 20: 21-23, Acts 1: 4-5, 8 New Living Translation

Presbyterians and the Holy Spirit:

As I have been reading and learning while preparing training material for elders I have come across some of the stories from our Presbyterian roots. I would like to share something of that forgotten heritage with you.

Because you see the Presbyterianism that I have experienced, and I expect it's not been much different for you, is only part of the story of who we are and God's graciousness to us. In fact I would dare to suggest that our experience of being Presbyterian would be something that many of our forebears wouldn't recognise as being Presbyterian. Today people use the word 'Presbyterian' in much the same way as they would 'pedestrian!'

Some what slow and staid!

However, Presbyterians have not been strangers to the working of God's Holy Spirit as many would believe. To say that evident manifestations related to the ministry of the Holy Spirit are not part of our Presbyterian heritage is far from the truth.

As I have been working on this training material I came across the second Book of Disciplines written in 1578, (it's an early Book of Order!) I was struck by the use of these words in relation to eldership, 'Word' and 'Spirit' that appear in various ways but always together.

These words caught my attention. As I continued in my study, something of the context of early Presbyterianism started to make some sense.

I'm drawing from a variety of sources in what I have to say. I would like to especially acknowledge Roy McKenzie in Gore who, for many years, along with his wife June, have championed the cause of revival among God's people. Roy has co-authored with Robert Evans the book 'Evangelical Revivals in New Zealand'. Roy has provided valuable material to me out of his research.

Revivals in Scotland:

Listen to this from an essay on Presbyterianism by a United States writer, Keith Beebe, at the time adjunct professor at Whitworth College Spokane and pastor of Knox Presbyterian Church, Spokane, Washington State.

He is quoting from a book by David Calderwood.

St Giles Cathedral, Edinburgh, Scotland.
Tuesday March 30, 1596

As the Holy Spirit pierces their hearts with razor sharp conviction, John Davidson concludes his message, steps down from the pulpit, and quietly returns to his seat. With downcast eyes and heaviness of heart, the assembled leaders silently reflect upon their lives and ministry. The words they have just heard are true and the magnitude of their sin is undeniable. As the minutes pass, a growing sense of God's presence and holiness intensifies, and a spirit of deep repentance breaks in upon them, disrupting their silence. Suddenly loud sighs and groans reverberate throughout the Cathedral as proud men donning (wearing) long beards and clerical garb begin to shake uncontrollably in tearful sobbing, melting under profound conviction of their sin. Caught by surprise and overwhelmed by the Spirit, those present during this momentous hour are about to experience a radical reorientation of their lives. In turn, they will then be used by God to carry the torch of revival fire from this place, igniting a blaze that will sweep across the Scottish landscape. Indeed, this 1596 General Assembly will later be remembered as having signalled a new chapter in the life of the Church of Scotland

(David Calderwood The True History of the Church of Scotland, 1678 (Menston, Yorkshire: Scolar Press 1971) pp315-17 Reported by Keith Deward Beebe Touched By The Fire: Presbyterians and Revival published in Theology Matters A Publication of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry Vol 6 No. 2 Mar/Apr 2000)

Beebe goes on to make the point that the Presbyterian Church was born out of a spiritual awakening taking place in Scotland in the late 1500s. Another historian says that the reformation was the first great spiritual awakening in Scotland:

"An awakening all the more thorough because of the people's deep sleep throughout the preceding centuries.... It was in reality a deep moving of the heart of the nation towards God." (*Roberts ed. 'Scotland Saw His Glory. (A compilation of Materials Gathered from the Works of W.J. Couper)*

Such was this hunger in Scotland that John Knox said in a 1555 letter to his mother:

"...the fervent thirst of our brethren day and night sobbing and groaning for the bread of life. If I had not seen it with my own eyes in my own country, I could not have believed it....the fervency here doth far exceed all others that I have seen."

(*Knox, Davis Laing, ed. Works. Iv. (letter from Knox to Mrs. Bowes 4 Nov. 1555) Edinburgh: James Thin.*)

The church was not only born in revival but has been nurtured in revival as well. The Scottish Presbyterians had as their central focus, as an integral part of their identity and piety, the need for people to be awakened to their need of Jesus.

At the time there was plenty of debate on doctrine, church government and public worship. The real purpose of all this debate was the issue of how each person could best find God through Jesus Christ.

The particular outpouring at the 1596 General Assembly had a profound effect throughout Scotland as those caught up in the repentance and consequent spiritual passion moved back into their synods and parishes.

There are many reports of this revival flame throughout the history of Scottish Presbyterianism. There were major evident moves of the Spirit throughout Scotland as a whole, in 1859 - 60, and 1873 - 74. There have been at least a further 24 moves in various locations throughout the land;

- two during the 17th Century,
- 4 in the 18th Century,
- 12 in the 19th century and
- 6 in the 20th century, 4 of those on Isle of Lewis alone; the last of those being 1949 to 1953.

More work is being done by scholars on this forgotten aspect of Presbyterian history so it will be interesting to see what further research will show.

Of some of these visitations various historians have said:

"From 1843, the year of Disruption "to the end of the nineteenth century, Scotland was seldom without the Spirit's working in some part of the country."

(*R.O. Roberts, ed., Scotland Saw His Glory - A History of Revivals in Scotland (Wheaton, Illinois: International Awakening Press, 1995), pp. 27-28.*)

And again:

"The successive outpourings of the Holy Spirit over Skye brought spiritual awakenings which progressively transformed the spiritual, social, and educational face of the Island. In 1842 the population of Skye was 25,000. There were few families in the whole Island who did not have *at least* one person touched by the transforming work of the Spirit."

(*Steve Taylor, The Skye Revivals (Chichester, England: New Wine Press, 2003).*

And again:

"Rev. Duncan Campbell, Free Church of Scotland, described the result of the Holy Spirit's 1949 outpouring over Lewis, as "a community saturated with God. The presence of God was a universal, inescapable fact: at home, in the church, and by the roadside. Many who visited Lewis

during this period became vividly conscious of the spiritual atmosphere before they reached the island."

(A. Woolsey, *Channel of Revival - A Biography of Duncan Campbell* (Edinburgh: The Faith Mission, 1974, 1982), p. 121.)

We have an account of the Kirk of Shotts revival written by John Livingstone who, on Monday June 21st 1630, was concluding his churchyard communion message when the atmosphere took on a dramatic change. Livingstone said:

"There was so convincing an appearance of God and down-pouring of the Spirit, even in an extraordinary way.... with a strange unusual motion on the hearers.....a discernible change wrought upon them, of whom most proved lively Christians afterwards."

(John Gillies *Historical Collections Relating to Remarkable Periods of the Gospel and Eminent Instruments Employed in Promoting It*. Originally published in Glasgow: Robert and Andrew Foulz 1754. Reprinted in Fairfield, PA: Banner of Truth 1981 p 169)

On this occasion the Holy Spirit was evidenced as an unusual, abrupt outpouring described as an 'eruption.' It lasted just the day but the effect was widely felt and this visitation took a prominent place in the Presbyterian story.

According to Beebe, "by the end of the 16th century and into the next, a vital faith in Jesus Christ – accompanied by dynamic operations of the Holy Spirit – had become the very hallmark of the Presbyterian movement. 'This dependence upon the Holy Spirit's moving within individual souls and the resulting religious emphasis upon emotionally charged piety had dominated Scottish Christianity since the early 17th century' " (*The Triumph of the Laity WesterKamp*)"

Throughout the 16th century there was evidence of the 'charismata' – the Gifts of the Holy Spirit - in operation even amongst the Covenanters. The evidence has been validated by historical research.

Indeed Jack Deere in his book 'Surprised by the Voice of God' has a chapter on Presbyterian Prophets, people who exercised a strong prophetic ministry. Also, in a taped sermon to his church following his research in Edinburgh for the book, Deere tells of his discovery of the work of the Spirit in the early days of Presbyterianism where the dead were raised, the sick healed, the gospel preached with power and the Spirit being so powerfully present that members of congregations had to be carried from the building of their meeting so that the school could start.

Of particular interest to us here in Otago, it is said of Thomas Burns:

"He was born in the traditions of old Scotland. He was baptised in the spirit of the revival which fired the Free Church with marvelous zeal and power. He was in the succession of John Knox, the Covenanters, and Thomas Chalmers."

(E. N. Merrington, *A Great Coloniser - The Rev. Dr. Thomas Burns, Pioneer Minister of Otago* (Dunedin: The Otago Daily Times, 1929), p. 273.)

Beebe makes the comment that a study of our denomination's early history reveals the central role Presbyterians had in the revival of evangelical Christianity in the English speaking world. He goes on to say that the great work for social change for which Presbyterians are known comes out of these moves of God's Spirit, though that aspect is not much acknowledged in our time.

Is this because it's theologically out of favour or is it simply ignorance of our story?

As the Presbyterians left Scotland this spirit of revival went with them throughout the world but especially to Ireland and on to the USA but it would not appear in New Zealand.

Ireland:

In Ireland a spiritual awakening began in 1625 in Antrim as the result of Scottish Presbyterian preachers arriving in the country the year before. By 1625 large groups gathered together for the preaching and communion and I quote:

"These meetings began with a sermon on Thursday evening, continued with sermons all Friday – three in the Winter and four in the Summer." (*Westercamp: The Triumph of the Laity*).

The influence of these meetings spread throughout Antrim and Down where in some locations a prayer meeting might last from three to five days, with thousands of people in attendance. Some of the dramatic manifestations of swooning, panting, weeping, shouting, and others that had been seen in Scotland were also seen in these Irish meetings.

The birth of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland effectively dates from this time.

According to the same historian:

"Simply put, the people were interested in attending religious services, and the services they wanted were revivalist. Such rituals involved massive numbers of participants collected indoors and out; they lasted for several days, sometimes as long as two weeks. Individuals responded openly and emotionally to provocative preaching and prayers, seeking the ultimate goal of conversion. Lay participation was encouraged during these services, as well as in the general spiritual life of the parish, and this was a power that the laity were loath to relinquish." (*Westercamp: The Triumph of the Laity*)

My how things have changed!

United States:

On to the United States.

The 'Great Awakenings' in that country, according to Keith Beebe, were lead by the Presbyterians, both Scottish and Irish, as they came to settle in this new land and William Sweet, another historian, makes the same claim when he says:

"It is an interesting fact that most of the great American revival movements have come largely through Presbyterianism."

It was the support of Presbyterian ministers that allowed this movement to sweep through the colony. By 1742 it was clear that these moves of the Holy Spirit had become a transatlantic phenomenon.

Two famous people in the United States Awakenings were Jonathon Edwards, a Calvinist and Charles Finney, a Presbyterian.

In these United States 'Awakenings', which were deeply influenced by Presbyterian preachers..... the forms and phenomena characteristic of frontier revivals – even some of the more unusual types - were heavily influenced and fashioned after the traditions of Scottish Presbyterianism. (Beebe)

New Zealand:

In New Zealand we have not yet seen classic revival although there was one showing similar signs at Knapdale/Waikaka during the 1880s, where there was a sovereign work of the Spirit through a local farmer, James Dickie. This had such an effect on the spiritual vitality of the area that the echoes are still there today. James Dickie was converted and simultaneously filled with the Spirit on New Year's Day 1881. There were reports of farmers being struck down under the conviction of the Holy Spirit as they were ploughing their fields.

However there have been significant moves of God in evangelism within New Zealand with periods when many were brought to faith in Jesus. It is interesting to note that during the 19th and early 20th Centuries the Presbyterians were often in the forefront of these moves almost more so than any other

denomination at that time. I've heard this description of the difference between revival and evangelism:

Evangelism is the evangelist seeking the lost and revival is the lost seeking God.

I recommend the book by Roy McKenzie and Robert Evan.

Other revivals throughout the world in which Presbyterians have been prominent have been in the 1904/05 Welsh revival, out of which grew the Presbyterian Church of Wales from the former Calvinistic Methodist Church where the revival began.

In Korea from 1904 onwards where there has been almost continuous revival with dramatic church growth.

Indonesia, 1964-74 in the Protestant Evangelical Church, East Timor

Shillong, North East India 1906, and again in 2006 – 07. If you search Shillong Revival you will find evidence of present revival activity among Presbyterians in North India.

I quote from an article of this move of God's Spirit:

"The Khasi Hills Revival (1905-1906) in India saw 8,200 former Hindu's baptised within two years. The Rev. Vanlalchhuanawma, an expert in the history of Christian revivals, speaking to the BBC news website in October 2006 said, "The revival in 1906 gave help to the evangelical works of Welsh missionaries in both [the states of] Meghalaya and Mizoram." A century later, revival broke out again and by June 2007, many churches had already celebrated their first anniversary of experiencing revival within their church.

The revival began on Saturday the 22 April 2006 among a huge number of people in Mairang, the place where the 1906 revival first broke out. Hundreds of delegates were attending the afternoon service of the Revival Centenary commemoration, whilst a minimum of 150,000 people (with reports of up to 300,000) sat outside on the huge lawns of the Mairang Presbyterian Church. The Holy Spirit came 'in such a powerful way' that the delegates continued to sing and pray for hours, unmoved, in driving rain which continued for about half an hour.

Barkos Warjri, a Khasi who lives in Shillong, wrote: 'The revival is taking place in an area of about 14,000 square kilometres and has affected thousands of local churches. The churches affected have been almost entirely Presbyterian but a few other denominations have been touched.' The revival has even touched some churches in the adjoining state of Mizoram.

'Many people, especially children, have been miraculously converted without any preaching, but simply by the conviction of the Holy Spirit. Miraculous events have also taken place in many of the churches Families and whole communities have been transformed.' The Holy Spirit even descended on all schools in the area, be they state schools, church schools, or private schools [and on a college of more than two thousand pupils!] For several of the schools, regular classes were disrupted. Children from the age of about five expressed strong desires to be in church or simply to sing praises to God and pray.'

Friday Lyngdoh, Minister with the Meghalaya Government, in January 2007 said that the changes in society were real. When asked if he had seen any of the big signs of the revival,..... he replied, "No, I have not. But I have seen the street outside my house. The people who used to stand around in the dark – drunk and swearing – have reduced a lot. Many broken families have got together. Yes, many people have experienced change."

So back to that second Book of Disciplines.

The moving of the Holy Spirit in 16th century Scotland is the context in which it was written. Knox, and those with him, was concerned for a right balance between the Presbyterian's and Reformers' love and respect for the written word of God, and also the physical evidence of the Spirit of God working among and through His people. I am sure that this balance between 'Word' and 'Spirit' is part of the reason that Scotland has been blessed so frequently with these outpourings and why they have followed Presbyterians throughout the world. It is the Presbyterian emphasis on the importance of being firmly based in the Word of God but also the expectation that the Spirit would move as is seen in that Word that, I believe, has been the reason for the ongoing evidence of the Power of the Spirit within our history and still in parts of our movement.

I can't recall who said this but it has stuck with me. All word, we dry up, all Spirit, we blow up, Spirit and Word, we grow up.

I recall a friend praying that the Lord would do here in this country what my friend was seeing God do in others and the thought came to him "Do you want the crumbs from someone else's table or the main meal I have for you!" He stopped praying the way he had been.

In Scotland, or any other place for that matter, not all would be caught up in the movement of God. This has always been so – even on the day of Pentecost there were those who stayed outside the move of God's Spirit. There have always been many who have not wanted any part of these movements and no doubt, as in our time, positions have been taken and fiercely defended. Presbyterians have always been a diverse lot which is both a strength and a weakness. A strength in that we have the opportunity to canvass a wide range of views. A weakness because too often we have allowed this diversity to drive us apart. After all the essence of how we try to do things as Presbyterians is to collectively seek the mind of God through the diverse gifts and viewpoints that He has given to His church. We have always suffered when any one group gains the ascendancy and ignores the others in our midst. No one of us can possibly know the mind of the King of the Universe, the Eternal God.

Revivals are criticised because of their perceived, and at times real, excesses. After all, on the day of Pentecost people thought that the apostles were drunk at 9 in the morning!

The Spirit of God can be very messy from our nicely ordered ways. He can be very uncomfortable and disturbing, even chaotic from our perspective, but in the words of CS Lewis about Aslan the lion "He's not a tame lion!." Neither is the Lion of Judah!

One of the core values is the need for us to feel we are in control. Often we won't admit to this and in fact say the opposite about letting the Holy Spirit lead. The problem is that the Holy Spirit will not be controlled – hence in exercising control we quench His work. I believe that God responds by letting us have the control where and when we want it and in the end when we can't sort things out He so graciously responds when we turn to Him in desperation. We are good at telling Him what He should do but not so good at listening to that still small voice of calm is asking of us. We think we are now mature enough and don't need the supernatural of God and we are afraid that things could well spiral out of our control. They are very likely to!

This seeming chaos that can come from the uncontrollable Spirit of God offends our present Presbyterian concept of 'decently and in order'. However in his first Corinthian letter Paul was referring to the seeming chaotic order of a God worshipping environment not the sense of order in a grave yard. In his letter to the church he is saying that you will know that the Spirit of God is at work because in the seeming chaos and disorder there is order. All does, in fact, lead somewhere – it all fits together – it all has a place. From what I have been reading it seems that our forebears were quite familiar with this supposed 'chaos.'

I also know this from my own experience of leading a congregation where we deliberately set out to be reliant on the leading of the Spirit of God. We didn't appreciate it then but we were, in fact, deeply planted in Presbyterian and reformed traditions. This was a quiet but powerful expression of God at

work changing lives and, in the end, leading many of those who were part of it into ministry in their communities. In the end all those who were a regular part of that congregation came to understand what mission was and all found themselves caught up in ministry in the places where they spent their time. Many were brought to faith in Jesus, the sick were healed, the Gospel was proclaimed by the people. We didn't see the dead raised, although on one occasion some thought that might have happened, - it couldn't be verified - but we did see people delivered from evil spirits. All this is a quiet and orderly Presbyterian way!

In fact the local Pentecostals found this 'too hot to handle' even in its Presbyterian quietness and order under the Spirit of God.

For the last four years I was involved, each time we met on Sunday evenings the presence of God so graciously descended upon us as we gathered to worship that you could almost touch Him. Certainly I needed to hold onto the lectern to keep my balance. It was head spinning stuff!

I have been part of moves of God's Spirit on young people that lasted for three days as the Lord deeply affected their lives. I could share many stories but not here or now – time does not permit except to say, that after one such dramatic time I was greatly impressed when the young people shared their experience with the wider church. They did not focus on the dramatic expressions of the Spirit's presence but on the change they noticed in their own lives bringing them closer to Jesus.

What we were experiencing during this time was ignored by the local wider church, looked at with real scepticism and some fear. In fact I was asked not to report to the local Session, I was told, 'Shut up Bruce we don't want to know.' What we were involved in was considered as not being Presbyterian!

What I have been learning this year about our roots makes much more sense of what we experienced in that Presbyterian fellowship. I'm deeply moved that we were moving in the traditions of our branch of God's church and we were not strange at all! This, by the way, was a church plant entirely begun and carried forward by 'unschooled, ordinary' people. (Acts 4:13) It can be done, just as we see in the book of Acts, because it is still the same God and Lord.

What's The Point of All This History?

What I am wanting to say in all this, is that the working of the Holy Spirit in power and signs and wonders, as seen in Jesus ministry and the early church, is not foreign to Presbyterianism. They are very much part of our heritage and one I would like to see claimed back from God. I would suggest that most of what we have experienced as being Presbyterian is less than the real thing. Real, in our time perhaps, but certainly not real for many of our forebears. Remember the commission I read at the beginning – it includes all this as normal! In fact it is a common heritage for all who are called the children of God. This is the birthright of all who follow Jesus. I don't believe it's an optional extra. Following Jesus is not a smorgasbord it is the complete deal.

I also want to say that I don't claim to be an expert or authority on this subject of our Presbyterian heritage. But I am excited by what I'm learning, saddened by what we have mislaid and hopeful that, in bringing it to our attention, God is preparing us for a rediscovery of what has been such a strong part of our heritage.

Neither am I wanting to say, "Let's go back to the past." We can't, even if we wanted to, but let's use this as we move forward. God is a creative God. None of us are the same and neither are any two snowflakes. Don't go looking for a repeat of what God has done in the past – nor even what He has done or is doing in other places in our time. What I am wanting is that we be open and sensitive to what the Spirit of God is about within our 21st Kiwi context. I'm wanting us to be actively seeking His mind. He understands Kiwi culture and knows how He can reach into it to draw people to Himself. The common things we share with our forebears are that all is directed to people seeing their need of reconciliation with our God through Jesus Christ. That as His people we will indeed be the Body of Christ which is what we are called to be in our time and place.

For me being the Body of Christ means that as people look into, and observe the church as it is involved in God's mission, they should expect to see through us collectively, the same things happening in our community as those who observed the ministry of Jesus as He walked and interacted in His community.

It shouldn't surprise us that in the past Presbyterians have demonstrated this, as we are known to be a people of the Word. Look again at the commission - this is all part and parcel of the call.

That Word clearly states that this way of life should be the norm for us.

Often when we read Scripture we filter it through our experience and when it doesn't match that experience, we feel that Scripture is deficient. In fact when our experience doesn't line up with the Scripture I guess it should be our experience that we question. If we are not seeing these works of the Spirit in our midst then it's not that these have been withdrawn from God's people - the whole church in Africa and Asia would rise up in witness against us - it's that these things do not sit comfortably with us so we are not open to God graciously bestowing them on and through us.

I'm not promoting a Charismatic movement revival. Heaven forbid. But at least that movement showed us that God was still active in the same way we see Him in the pages of Scripture and, if only we had had eyes to see it, in Presbyterianism. What happened was that those of us who got caught up in that renewal turned it inward as a 'bless me' club. Read the commission again – it's not for the church so much as for the community. I am sure that as we get on with the commission and live the Gospel in our communities we will find that these gifts have not left us. When we stop 'doing' mission and become the mission.

Throughout the history of God's people since the time of the Scriptures, right into our time, this truth of the normal Christian life has and is being demonstrated.

So there are some questions I would like to ask:

- Why aren't we seeing this active presence and activity of the Holy Spirit in our time and communities?
- Have we become so 'educated' as people of the Word that we have talked ourselves out of being also people of the Spirit?
- Have we become so 'sophisticated' and 'mature' in our theology we have become proud in our own understanding? I am not for a moment suggesting theological education is of no value. Far from it. But it is true that we really only acknowledge an academic form of theological studies and there is a huge snobbery surrounding this.
- What's the point of theological study if the language used excludes other people from getting the benefit of that study?
- Have we become cynical of these evidences of the Spirit because of the excesses we have experienced or heard about from others? But remember, "He's not a tame Lion!"
- Are we fearful of losing control both of ourselves and the church?
- Why are so many of God's people tired and dry?
- Or this question that I shared with a young man that then came back to bite me! Am I in love with Jesus or with the idea of Jesus?

I wonder what your response to that question is. Let's take a moment to talk about that among ourselves.

I have come to realize something as I listen and find myself engaged in conversations with others in the church. These conversations have included such things as:

- the style or form of liturgy
- vestments and appropriate clothing for preaching
- styles of worship and music
- prayer types and methods
- ministry styles and who may or may not do what and where
- governance styles
- mission methods
- church growth

Paul tells us in Ephesians that we, the children of God, are the praise and glory of His name. Well I ask you – think about our conversations. It seems to me that we are more in love with the idea of church than being in love with the idea of Jesus let alone Jesus Himself. Think about it!

You see I think we are fixated on church growth. That's not the issue.

The issue is the proclamation and demonstration of the Kingdom of God. The survival of our congregations, the meeting of our budgets so we can continue to do what we have been doing, are the real drivers of church growth. Church and church growth are the by product of mission not the purpose of mission. God is not asking the church to survive – He's guaranteed that – our call is to proclaim, to demonstrate the Kingdom of God in our communities that all will have the opportunity to be put right with God through Jesus. It's Jesus who must be our focus. The Spirit will always point to Him as He is the only way to the Father.

Conclusion:

In the musical My Fair Lady, Elisa Doolittle reacts to the advances of Freddie's words of love. I often think that I hear these words from our communities as they look at us and our love for words. Listen to part of what Elisa says and hear our communities' cry in her words:

Words! Words! Words! I'm so sick of words!
I get words all day through;
First from him, now from you! Is that all you blighters can do?

Don't talk of love lasting through time.
Make me no undying vow.
Show me now!
Sing me no song! Read me no rhyme!
Don't waste my time, Show me!
Don't talk of June, Don't talk of fall!
Don't talk at all! Show me!
Never do I ever want to hear another word.
There isn't one I haven't heard.

.....

Don't wait until wrinkles and lines
Pop out all over my brow,
Show me now!

I think Paul would have understood Elisa when he said in his first letter to the Corinthians:

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. ² For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. ³ And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. ⁴ My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵ so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.

The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version. 1989 (1 Co 2:1-5). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

We certainly have records of the Spirit demonstrating His power through Paul.

Even Jesus, I think, would understand Elisa's plea when He tells us in John that we will do the same and greater things than Him because He is going to the Father.

St Francis is credited with saying, "Wherever we go proclaim the Gospel and, if need be, use words."

My hope and prayer is that we can allow God to lead us to this heritage that is ours by right of being God's children, not just because we are Presbyterian. This is the heritage and responsibility of all who call Jesus Lord, Saviour and Brother. Also I would want to say that the main work of the Spirit is to transform us more into the likeness of Jesus and certainly Jesus did all these things we see our forbears were doing.

I do not want to take us back. We are already stuck back there somewhere. Even our so called contemporary services are stuck somewhere back there. Some of us resent being called out of the 1950s and 60s when it was so good, at least, as we see it from this distance.

No, let's ask God for the heritage of His Spirit that we may move forward with Him. He is and has always been the God of the forward movement. Our history shows that it's when we humbly walk with Him and with the power of His Spirit that we see people brought into relationship with Him in large numbers and society changed for the better. Or don't we think that 21st century New Zealand needs a makeover by the power of God through the working of His Spirit?

There is a growing hunger for something. Look at responses to the recent Christchurch earthquake or Pike River disaster. For a so called secular nation that has no need or time for God (that actually is a lie we have bought), people have been calling for public expressions of prayer and solace in times of trauma. All over the world, in fact, wherever New Zealanders are. We are not a secular nation at all – we are a deeply spiritual people most of whom see the established institutions of Christianity as 'religious,' irrelevant and badly out of date. I can't say I disagree with that perception myself.

I am coming across people talking of dryness more and more often as I travel throughout the Synod.

I am daring to hope that God, from whom all things come, is allowing this dryness and discontent as a means of calling us to come closer to Him; to realise that I can't live His life in my own strength; that I can't be engaged in His mission on my terms; that we all need to come to a much deeper surrender to His will and leave behind the things we want.

In other words, become Jesus-centred people, not our natural self-centred selves.

Jesus says,

"The water that I give takes away thirst forever. It becomes a perpetual spring within, giving eternal life."

And again, "If you are thirsty, come to me! If you believe (that is, continue to actively believe) in me, come and drink! For the Scriptures declare that rivers of living water will flow out from within."

The gospel goes on to say of this statement:

'When He said "living water" He was speaking of the Spirit, who would be given to everyone believing in Him. But the Spirit had not yet been given, because Jesus had not yet entered into His glory.'

Well He has now entered into His glory and the Spirit has now been poured out just as He said and as we read in the commission. Our Presbyterian forebears will stand before God and witness against us for our lack of faith.

Let me conclude with this invitation from our gracious God:

"Is anyone thirsty? Come and drink – even if you have no money! Come, take your choice of wine or milk – it's all free. Come to me with your ears wide open. Listen, for the life of your soul is at stake."
(Isaiah 55: 1-3a)

For the life of our soul is at stake.

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