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## PRACTICE 1

# AGREE TO EVALUATE YOUR ASSUMPTIONS

### *The Indwelling Spirit Challenges Me to Find the Balance of “Spirit and Truth”*

Pastor Jim Cymbala is well known for his book *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire*, which has captivated and challenged thousands of readers with stories of dramatically changed lives. His wife, Carol, leads the famous Grammy-award-winning Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir. Cymbala preaches to over ten thousand every weekend in multiple church services. Every Tuesday night, thousands gather for the weekly prayer meeting, just as they have done for over forty years.

In recent years, Jim has become a treasured friend. He helps to lead a national coalition of pastors called *The 6:4 Fellowship* (64fellowship.com). Under this banner, Jim and I have sponsored one-day gatherings for Christian leaders in various cities across America, calling them back “to prayer and to the ministry of the word,” the leadership priorities emphasized in Acts 6:4.

I’ve often heard Jim say, “When it comes to the Holy Spirit, churches are either cemeteries or insane asylums.” Certainly there many churches that have found the balance and enjoy a rich

experience of the Holy Spirit. But as I think of my own Christian journey, that pretty much sums it up. I was deeply embedded in and enamored with both extremes in the early years of my Christian faith, often bouncing between the two like a well-manipulated pinball.

### DIVERSE AND DIVIDED

Looking back decades later, I am keenly aware of all the divergent opinions about matters of the Spirit. It seems so odd that the clear truth of the Scriptures about the person and work of the Holy Spirit has become so convoluted by our various doctrinal and denominational differences. The Spirit's work is to unite the people of Christ with one heart and mission. Somewhere along the way, we've mucked it up with debate, division, and even disdain.

It's quite difficult to be completely unbiased in our application of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. We all suffer from some degree of subjectivity. I agree with David Peterson, who wrote, "Those who desire to bring their theology and practice under the criticism and control of the biblical revelation can find themselves in serious conflict with one another. Most of us are more conditioned by custom and personal preference in this matter than we would care to admit!"<sup>1</sup>

Some of us lack significant experience in the life of the Spirit and so tend to be very skeptical and even afraid of things outside our carefully defined practices. And some of us cherish certain experiences, some of which cannot be explained biblically, but are still very real. We can even make these experiences sacrosanct. This can create a filter through which we interpret the work of the Spirit and even judge others who have not been on the same journey.

I think it is safe to say that we have to get "past our past." This

is not an easy or comfortable process. Yet it is absolutely essential if we are going to come to terms with clear New Testament experience of the Holy Spirit both personally and in our congregational gatherings.

Reformed writer Michael Horton notes, “If some churches marginalize the Spirit in favor of the institution and its forms, others react simply by making the opposite choice. However, there are myriad ways of domesticating the Spirit besides assimilating his sovereign work to formalism. If some render the Spirit an ecclesiastical employee, others presume to make the Spirit a mascot for a movement or a prisoner of their own private experience.”<sup>2</sup>

## SPOOKED BY THE GHOST

According to research by the Barna Organization, most Christians do not believe that the Holy Spirit is a *living* force. (We’ll talk more about the “force” word later.) “Overall, 38% strongly agreed and 20% agreed somewhat that the Holy Spirit is ‘a symbol of God’s power or presence but is not a living entity.’”<sup>3</sup> Among those who believe in the biblical understanding of the Holy Spirit, much confusion still exists.

The church I grew up in preached from the old King James Version of the Bible. In that translation, the Holy Spirit is called the “Holy Ghost.” In my elementary years I would often watch a little cartoon titled “Casper the Friendly Ghost.” It was not clear if this little guy was a boy who died and became a ghost or if he was just born to ghost parents. In any case, Casper was an outgoing goblin. Yet he often scared people in his attempts to befriend humans. One of his more popular lines stated, “I’ll never be nothin’ but a scary ol’ ghost without any friends.”

In my mind, I thought that maybe after Jesus died He came

back as the Holy Ghost. Like Casper, I assumed He was friendly, but I was a little bit spooked by the idea of a religious presence floating around waiting to show up at an unexpected moment to conduct some unusual spiritual business with me. Admittedly, this was beyond silly, but I wondered if the Spirit was also a bit scary to many other Christians and if they even really understood or embraced the whole idea of the Holy Spirit.

My childish misconceptions aside, I've met some Christians who seem to view the Holy Spirit as an ethereal, perhaps scary, entity hovering in the church's vent system, ready to pounce unexpectedly, inciting strange behaviors and out-of-the-box emotions—all for Jesus.

### LEANING TOWARD THE SPIRIT

Depending on your upbringing (or religious television viewing habits), you may have witnessed some bizarre antics promoted to be church-as-usual. In my high-school years, I visited, witnessed, wondered and even tasted of a pretty titillating variety of Christian experiences attributed to the Holy Spirit.

Assembly of God scholar Gordon Fee admits, "Pentecostals, in spite of some of their excesses, are frequently praised for recapturing for the church her joyful radiance, missionary enthusiasm, and life in the Spirit. But they are at the same time noted for bad hermeneutics. . . . First, their attitude toward Scripture regularly has included a general disregard for a scientific exegesis and carefully thought-out hermeneutics (the science of the study of Scripture). In fact, hermeneutics has simply not been a Pentecostal thing. Scripture is the Word of God and is to be obeyed. In place of scientific hermeneutics, there developed a kind of pragmatic hermeneutics—obey what should be taken literally;

spiritualize, allegorize, or devotionalize the rest. . . . Secondly, it is probably fair—and important—to note that in general the Pentecostals’ experience has preceded their hermeneutics. In a sense, the Pentecostal tends to exegete his experience.”<sup>4</sup>

## LEANING TOWARD THE TRUTH

At the more reserved end of the spectrum, many evangelical churches value heady, in-depth Bible teaching (and rightly so). Yet this mostly cognitive approach can inadvertently diminish a proper emphasis on the Holy Spirit. I will admit that for a season in my own life, I honestly viewed God as one big brain who worked exclusively in my mind. Anything below the neck might be excessive. I gave very little value to the total personality of the Spirit of God to work in my entire being—including my emotions (gasp!).

This cognitive bent can easily downgrade into a very predictable and systematized approach to the Christian life. I say it often: “Prayerlessness is my declaration of independence from God.” The temptation to live on spiritual autopilot is constant. In our highly educated, prosperous, and theologically astute Christian cultures we can tend to settle for “zipper prayers” to open or close various gatherings.

It also plays out corporately in the process of worship-planning and direction of worship services. The tech sheet is systematically concocted midweek, songs are plugged in, and the sermon is slotted like finely tuned machinery. Certainly, planning has its place. Yet, when a prayerful

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and substantive reliance on the Holy Spirit does not to inspire and guide our planning, we stumble. When prayer is simply reduced to transition moments in the service, we are in danger of “doing church” week after predictable week, without a conscious and substantive reliance on the Holy Spirit.

In some circles, even biblical expressions of worship are frowned upon, such as joyful clapping or the lifting of hands in prayer and surrender. Anyone not aligning with a strict conservative view of the spiritual gifts is lumped in with extreme prosperity preachers. Lines are drawn. Camps are created. Disregard for anyone who disagrees tends to follow.

### **LEANING ON THE ATMOSPHERE**

Most of my speaking opportunities in recent years have placed me in larger, typically nondenominational, congregations. These churches tend to have a sizable budget for their worship department. While participating in hundreds of these church services, I have observed that, in more recent years, the idea of experiencing the Holy Spirit is evidently associated with concert-style technology, digitized lights, environmental smoke, thundering sound systems, gargantuan images of worship leaders on a screen, and emotionally charged repetitious lyrics. While these tools are not necessarily wrong, they can become the perceived delivery systems of the presence of the Holy Spirit. And if one’s church cannot provide enough of this spiritual oomph for an inspiring experience of God, you can always get tickets to an event where traveling Spirit-accelerating performers will really turbo-boost our encounter with “the presence.” Ron Owens expresses his concern candidly: “Today, especially in the realm of church music, God is often being used to display man’s talent rather than

man's talent being used to display God.”<sup>5</sup> Owens offers a heart-felt appeal:

Be careful how you play with the emotions of the people God has entrusted to your leadership and care. Be careful that your people do not become so accustomed to getting a “praise high” when they come to church that a service seems empty if they do not experience it. Many today hop from group to group, from church to church, looking for higher highs. The tragedy is that they have been led to believe that what they are experiencing is the Holy Spirit, when it is nothing more than an intense emotional response.<sup>6</sup>

It's been said that what matters is not how high you jump on Sunday but how straight you walk on Monday. But ultimately, the devil's objective is not to diminish the excitement of our worship experience on weekends but rather, through any means, to discourage the empowerment of our daily walk in between. We have to make sure the sizzle of the service does not diminish the spiritual depth and enjoyment of our common walk with God.

We don't live at Disney World. While we all love extraordinary vacations, most of life is very mundane. As one friend says, “the work is in the valleys.” The truth of

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the indwelling Spirit of God can make the mundane meaningful and the ordinary extraordinary as we walk with Christ day by day. (Just in case you think that I am “against” emotions, chapter 9 of this book discusses how to enjoy the gift of emotion.)

### **LEANING ON OURSELVES**

Regardless of your theological journey in connection to the Holy Spirit, you might need to overcome one other major factor in your past. I’ll be the first to confess this one. We have a tendency to live independently of the Holy Spirit. We just don’t sense a deep and consistent need for Him. My friend, Robbie Symons, summarized it well: “We need to stop trying and start relying!”

Charles Spurgeon, perhaps the greatest and most widely read preacher of recent centuries, exemplified a humble reliance on the Holy Spirit. His ministry, based at the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London in the late 1800s, resulted in scores of thousands of people coming to Christ along with the launching of an orphanage and a pastor’s college. As he mounted the pulpit each week to preach to thousands, he silently declared to his own heart, with each of the fifteen steps, “I believe in the Holy Spirit. I believe in the Holy Spirit. I believe in the Holy Spirit.” Spurgeon wrote: “Without the Spirit of God we can do nothing; we are as ships without wind, or chariots without steeds; like branches without sap, we are withered; like coals without fire, we are useless; as an offering without the sacrificial flame, we are unaccepted.”<sup>7</sup>

### **PRYING US LOOSE**

By now, I have probably emerged as an equal opportunity offender. Admittedly, I have spoken in broad terms around the

categories of the spooky, the sensational, the stuck, the sizzling, and even the stubborn frameworks we adopt with regard to the work of the Spirit. But my heart's desire is to pry us all loose from anything that is not clearly biblical, spiritual, edifying, and gospel-promoting. These are urgent days in our society when the influence of the gospel is waning, to say the least. Our only real hope is Jesus Christ living through a revived church. This powerful enlivening work of the Word and Spirit must, in the truest sense, be an expression of the promises and principles of the Holy Spirit's own words, recorded in the Scriptures.

As we begin the journey together, I feel inadequate to write about the work of the Holy Spirit. I wonder if any writer is capable of dealing with so profound a theme. To borrow a common adage, "it is like trying to capture an ocean full of understanding in a thimbleful of thought." The person and work of the Holy Spirit is not always easy to define or explain. In the process of writing, I have read dozens of books, some of them quite peculiar and others far more in-depth and theologically rich than anything I could offer. I don't write because I am an expert or Pulitzer Prize-winning author. I write because truth has changed my life and is burning in my soul. I do not want to go to the grave before I share it in a way that will help the most people experience the best the Holy Spirit has to offer for the glory of Jesus and the supernatural advancement of His glorious gospel.

Still, I feel much like Warren Wiersbe when he wrote at the beginning of one of his (many) books: "I felt like a man trying to lay sunbeams in a row while evening was marching inexorably in. Then I decided that the problem was not the vastness of the subject but the narrowness of my own experience."<sup>8</sup>

## OPEN MIND, OPEN HEART

Let's agree together that we want to embrace the best of both Word and Spirit. I urge you, at the points where you may disagree—ponder and explore with an open mind what the Bible actually teaches.

In his book *Forgotten God*, Francis Chan asks,

Are you willing to pursue truth in your journey to know and be known by the Holy Spirit? Do you have enough humility to be open to the possibility that you have been wrong in your understanding of the Spirit? It's easy to get into "defensive mode," where you quickly disagree and turn to proof texts and learned arguments to defend what you've always believed. Rather than guarding your perspective, consider taking a fresh look at familiar passages to make sure you haven't missed something. You may end up with the same theology you've always had, but maybe you won't. Don't let your views be determined by a particular denomination or by what you've always been told. Within the context of relationship with other believers, seek out what God has said about His Spirit. Open up your mind and your life to the leading of the Spirit, regardless of what others may think or assume about you.<sup>9</sup>

Chan's words are important. Not only is the Holy Spirit often the "forgotten God," but for many of us He may be the "misrepresented God." Theologian Robert Lightner pointed out that the biblical doctrine of the Holy Spirit suffers today from three extremes: abuse, neglect, and distortion.<sup>10</sup>

I pray the Lord will give us discernment of those things really from Him. And, if we need to get past our past—then that’s a great first step. For that to happen, we might need to loosen our grip on our traditions. Let’s look honestly at our positions. Let’s expose our experiences to the MRI of the Bible. And please, let this book drive you to the Scriptures as the divine teacher, the Holy Spirit, guides your thoughts and responses. Let’s embrace these wise words from Andrew Murray:

**Not only is the Holy Spirit often the “forgotten God,” but for many of us He may be the “misrepresented God.”**

To everyone who honestly desires to know that he has the Spirit and to know Him in his person as a personal possession and teacher, we say: Study the teaching of the word in regard to the Spirit. Be not content with the teaching of the church or of men about the Spirit but go to the word. . . . Be determined to accept nothing but what the word teaches, but also to accept heartily all that it teaches.<sup>11</sup>

I trust you will feel a deep and lifelong conviction about your desperate need for the person and power of the Holy Spirit. Our Christian life is impossible without His indwelling presence. I pray that our heartfelt confession will habitually become, “I believe in the Holy Spirit. I believe in the Holy Spirit. I believe in the Holy Spirit.”