

Spirituality (Part Two)

“Where the Spirit of the Lord is”

Reflection 46 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

The church at first – the church we still turn to for guidance and direction – attributed everything good to the Spirit of God. In fact, it defies the nature of Christian faith to envision that in any age the church could make it on its own. All that is authentically Christian is, always has been, and always will be dependent on the Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit.

There is something deep in the human soul that knows this. If you go to Lourdes in the French Pyrenees, you will see at night a sea of candles approaching the shrine; you will hear Hail, Mary’s ringing out in all the languages of the world; and you will find 20,000 people daily chanting, praying, and carrying the sick and infirm with them. Pilgrimages are on the rise in Europe, all over Europe, not just at Lourdes, but at Fatima and Santiago de Compostela and many other places. I am not writing this to line up a tour to Lourdes: I approach such things with both healthy skepticism and a healthy respect for the mind-body connection. But I want us to note that while crowds flock to Lourdes, the churches of Europe continue to empty. There’s something interesting going on. You know, the average age of priests in Europe is now close to 60!

So what’s happening? How do you explain a continent giving up on church and going on pilgrimages? It seems to come down to this: that ordinary people are finding religious life, life as it’s done in traditional churches, too boring! Little is happening. It’s just keeping house and maintaining the traditions of the past. There’s nothing amazing going on. So people are hungering for something more intense, more hopeful, more of a celebration, more emotional. And not just in Europe. Everywhere they’re reacting against impersonal, formal, Spiritless religion. As they always will.

Now we see that the New Testament is not just a historical record, a dry account of things that happened once upon a time long ago in a land far, far away. It’s an invitation for anyone anywhere anytime to enter a whole new world open to the Spirit of God, alive to possibilities, a whole new world in which God intervenes, acts, hears us, listens, responds, works out his will in our lives, however God chooses and whenever God chooses, and so we are often surprised by joy and by miracle, and by what we had once thought was impossible. And now we can live confidently, expectantly, prayerfully, open to a world of amazing possibilities.

Life becomes something new, fresh and invigorating. To borrow the words of a song, “It’s a whole new world, a rich, fantastic point of view.” To wake up each morning in a world open to the Spirit of God, a world in which God is pouring out his Spirit on all people, is to live in a whole new world. But of course it’s possible to be entirely surrounded by this world open to the Spirit of God and never know it. Everyone knows that the Vikings were the first European settlers in America, but they did not “discover” America. They traveled forty-five hundred miles, across dangerous northern seas, actually reached America, landed, lived here for a while, without discovering America, because they had no category for a “new world” in their imaginations.

So amazing things can happen to us. A two-year-old son stabbed in the neck can live. A stranger can rescue us in a blizzard past midnight. An unseen hand can hold us back as we are about to fall down a flight of stairs. A vision can wake us in the night to prevent us from dying from food poisoning. A dying grandfather can say “Goodbye” to his grandson across town. We can be prayed for and have hands laid on us, and spots on our lungs can disappear. But if we don’t have a category in our mind for a world open to the Spirit of God, we can still miss it though it be all around us.

At stake is whether we live in an open or closed universe. First-century believers gladly attributed all that was good to the power of the Holy Spirit, and this sense of things, this way of seeing things, changed everything. They lived in an open universe, a whole new world where anything good and loving was possible. They knew there was a higher force working in and watching over their lives. Name it: Christ in you, the Spirit in you, your heavenly Father, or ministering angels. And so they lived in expectancy, with flashing eyes, untiring enthusiasm, and unshakable confidence in their future. Their lives were filled with meaning and purpose and significance. They could trust the flow of their lives whatever happened. They lived every day surrounded by grace, and with this heightened state of consciousness, they could always see so much “more” than unbelievers. And all of this is part of a new world in the morning, a new world that began back then but just beyond the thinnest of veils is still there. For all who believe.

There is a hunger out there, from New Haven all the way to New Jersey and all the towns in between, for a life filled with “something more.” The early believers, from Pentecost on, knew it was the Spirit of God. I want to be like those first believers (before we found all these clever ways to explain the Spirit away). I want to be that intoxicated with God, that carried away, that exhilarated, that energized by God, that full of God’s life in me.

The Holy Spirit is the life force behind the church. Everyday. Everywhere. For every believer. And that means now. Roger Whitaker (he’s an old-timer for everybody under 30, maybe 40) has a song called “New World in the Morning.” Where did he get that from? Its refrain goes:

Everybody’s talking ’bout a new world in the morning,
 New world in the morning, so they say;
 I myself don’t talk about a new world in the morning,
 New world in the morning, that’s today.

And it is today. So I can wake up this morning knowing: today is a day of new beginnings given. Today I can be renewed in God’s image. Today God grants me his light; today God grants me his grace; today God grants me his joy. Today I can sense the presence of God’s Spirit all around. Today, whether or not it is clear to me, what is good and loving is triumphing. Today the Spirit of God is still moving over the darkness, creating – still creating light from darkness, hope from despair, and meaning from chaos, and even if I should feel my world is ending, it is more likely that it is just beginning. Today a new world in the morning is being reborn.

We then are called to enter fully, mindfully, consciously into this new world open to the Spirit of God. We are meant to be fully religious and fully spiritual. Of course it begins in Christian baptism, and nothing could embody or re-inact this better than baptism. But then when I finally

enter this world, body and soul without reservations, so that I wake up in it every morning, life becomes entirely new. I experience the sheer joy of being alive and alive forever. I am animated, energized by trust. I can live vibrantly, increasingly fearlessly. And so much more is possible in my life and in the lives of those I love than I ever imagined.

– Dale Pauls