SPIRIT-FORMED COMMUNITIES

by KELLY M. KAPIC

illustrated by ANDREA MONGIA
What are the signs of the Spirit’s presence? Christians commonly ask questions like this, yet far too often the conversation immediately turns to debates about experiences of ecstasy. While these discussions are legitimate, it is surprising how often we miss one of the main indications of the Spirit’s presence in the New Testament.

To recognize the Holy Spirit’s work, look for the hallmark signs of sacrificial love and hospitality among God’s people. Tongues, prophetic utterances, mind-bending miracles all occurred and were formidable, but they always pointed beyond themselves toward God’s redemptive presence and healing power. Public manifestations of the Spirit were consistently meant to draw believers together even as God drew them to himself.

We often fail to fully appreciate this prevalent New Testament dynamic because we are not living amid the intense mistrust, distance, and even hostility that existed between the people of Israel and those from other nations. Yet only here do we discover a central movement of God’s work in this world. In bringing Jew and Gentile together, the Spirit’s activity of community formation loomed large as central to kingdom identity. Expansive love and embrace of the “other” became hallmark signs of Christian existence. Having received the Spirit who brings divine welcome, believers were then called to overcome prejudices, division, and distrust, learning about the vastness of God’s family. A pivotal scene in the history of redemption shapes our vision here.

BROUGHT TOGETHER BY THE SPIRIT

Peter and Cornelius—two different angelic visitations, two different men, and two different challenges. One represents the promises of God to his people, while the other represents those who have stood on the outside looking in. Each would be called to the other, and the result would serve to indicate God’s kingdom, bringing peace where there was division. Let us rehearse the story, for in this narrative we find the backbone of the New Testament’s vision for the Spirit’s post-Pentecost work in the church.

Like incense rising into the heavens, so God received the prayers and almsgiving of Cornelius “as a memorial” (Acts 10:4). Drawing near, the Lord spoke to this Gentile centurion, directing him to call for Simon Peter to visit his home. A Jew in his Gentile home? He knew this would be forbidden, yet wasn’t it God who spoke to him? Even though many in the Jewish nation respected Cornelius as a proselyte (a Gentile convert seeking to follow Yahweh), he remained an outsider. Questions lingered. What really was his relationship to the promises of God? And how was he related to God’s people?

About thirty miles away in Joppa, Peter, falling into a trance-like state, received a vision. A huge
sheet covering the earth, flat and populated with all "kinds of animals and reptiles and birds," descended before him. A voice urged him, “Rise, Peter, kill and eat” (Acts 10:13). A faithful Jew, Peter would have none of it, for he had maintained the purity laws his whole life. He would not claim something as “clean” when in fact he knew that the law said it was unclean. Again the voice spoke, now declaring, “What God has made clean, do not call common” (10:15). Given how hard this message would be to receive, it was repeated three times before the sheet was taken back up into heaven.

The Lord had spoken to a Jew and a Gentile, calling each to the other. Why? Cornelius had prepared his household for the expected visitor, uncertain yet hopeful. At the sight of Peter, the centurion leader immediately humbled himself and bowed, as if to worship Peter. Without hesitation, the apostle lifted him up, assuring him that praising a mere man could not be the meaning of the message. Yet something historic was clearly happening. Breaking through the darkness, the kingdom of God was dawning, bringing its light and warmth in ethnic reconciliation. Here, in this Gentile’s home, the fresh work of God’s restoration occurred as the Spirit reunited divided peoples. “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality,” Peter concluded—the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile must come down (Acts 10:34).

Unable to resist, Peter then reviewed the narrative of the life and ministry of Jesus, concluding with his resurrection. What happened next caught everyone off guard: “The Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word” (Acts 10:44)—not just on a particular king or prophet, nor on the Jews in general, but on all who received the word, including Gentiles. To make sure we don’t miss the significance, Luke reiterates the point, observing that Peter was “amazed because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles” (Acts 11:45). They spoke in tongues, they praised God, and Peter quickly connected the final dots, announcing, “Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” (Acts 10:48).

Let us not miss the movement of redemption here. By his anointing in the Spirit and demonstrations of divine power, Jesus was recognized as the Messiah (10:38). After his ministry (v. 38), crucifixion (v. 39), and then resurrection (v. 40), the risen Jesus communed with his people (v. 41). Yet now, the ascended Christ was not physically present, so his Spirit was poured out at Pentecost, serving as the sign of his continuing holy presence and redemptive love. Reminiscent of the waters of creation (Gen. 1:2), now the Spirit moved over the chaotic lands of the earth, restoring communion not only between the Creator and his creatures, but also communion between humans.

Peter discovered that the Spirit’s life-giving presence and power resided not simply with the Jews, but also with the Gentiles. Thus they should be one, united in their love for God and desire to serve him. The sign of God’s people would no longer be circumcision but the presence of the Spirit.

Controversy arose at the news of Gentiles receiving the word of God. Consequently, Peter went up to Jerusalem and personally faced his critics. Peter, recounting recent events, wanted to make sure this Jewish audience didn’t miss the point: “The Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning”
(Acts 11:15). What mattered most was the Spirit’s presence, trumping other identity markers. “If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way?” (Acts 11:17).

NO LONGER STRANGERS

How do you respond to this narrative? Our individualistic impulses can hurt us here. While we are familiar with this story, and honestly believe the gospel is for Jew and Gentile alike, we somehow lay aside the far-reaching implications. Most evangelicals today are tempted to concentrate on harmonizing their inner psychology, rather than recognizing the biblical priority of Spirit-built community. As people from every tongue and tribe come together to worship before the risen king, God’s Spirit gives believers a taste of the heavenly harmony that is to come.

The Apostle Paul’s letter to the Ephesians echoes similar themes of the Spirit’s concern to create a community of renewed people. Highlighting how the “dividing wall” between Jew and Gentile was shattered by Christ’s death, he likewise promised that all have “access in one Spirit to the Father” (Eph. 2:14–18). Rather than endless self-reflection, Paul pointed to how the Spirit’s presence changes our relationships, giving us a new identity and a new family. “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (Eph. 2:19). A warm welcome is extended to all of God’s people, no matter if they were circumcised or uncircumcised, male or female, rich or poor, Jew or Gentile.

While in our day some dismiss this call to Christian community as merely “political,” this doesn’t seem to reflect the hearts of Peter and Paul. Take, for instance, Paul’s description of the mystery of Christ revealed: “This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (Eph. 3:6). What was a mystery to Paul should remain awe inspiring to us today. Central to the gospel was the formation of a Spirit-built community that would cut across social, racial, and historical differences.

WALK THIS WAY

Paul concludes that those who have received the Spirit should “walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which [they] have been called” (Eph. 4:1). Listing some classic virtues, Paul mentions humility, gentleness, patience, and love (Eph. 4:2; cf., Gal. 5 and the fruits of the Spirit). Yet these virtues are not given merely to create individualized moral improvement, since he lays them all out with a distinctly ecclesial orientation. They are directed toward our life together. Eager to “maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3), we must learn to love by “bearing with one another,” and so on. Later in his letter (4:30), when Paul warned about grieving the Spirit, he had in mind behavior that disrupts and destroys the community of God. Again, his focus on the Spirit was not simply aimed at our internal worlds, but also our communal harmony as believers.

Thus as the church we must be careful of our natural inclinations to homogeneity. We tend to extend ourselves only to those who look like us, or who are socially and economically from similar backgrounds. But the gospel and the power of the Spirit break down these barriers, calling Jew and
Gentile, male and female, slave and free, together. Such “impartiality” has been one of the most powerful testimonies of the Spirit’s presence in the church through the ages.

**OUR UNITY REFLECTS THE UNITY OF GOD**

Notice, however, that unity is what is given rather than created. The goal here is not to create unity but to “maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4: 3). The unity is of the Spirit, not something we achieve; instead, we preserve and protect it. Our unity comes not from ourselves but from God, from his Spirit who unites us to Christ and thus to one another. In Jude we read that those who cause divisions are “worldly people, devoid of the Spirit” (Jude 19). But we who have the Spirit should be zealous about maintaining unity.

“We are one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all” (Eph. 4:4). Here Paul makes a further surprising connection between our doctrine of God and our doctrine of the church. Jesus likewise prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane that his people would be one even as he and the Father are one (John 17:21). New Testament scholar Andrew Lincoln aptly summarizes the point: “When the Church fails to maintain and express unity, it radically undermines the credibility of its belief in the one God” (Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians, World Biblical Commentary* [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990], 241). Mocking fellow believers or distancing ourselves from them because of some social, economic, or racial differences is not only a great offense to our heavenly Father, but it also perverts how the watching world will think of our God. We can say we believe whatever we want, but unless we make the unity of the people of God a top priority, we undermine our lofty theological claims and the witness of the Spirit of Christ among us.

**UNITY AMID DIVERSITY**

One final observation is critical. Although unity is emphasized throughout what we have discussed, Paul also highlights in Ephesians 4:7-16 the importance of diversity. Unity should not be achieved at the expense of legitimate differences. The Triune God is One, yet the Father is not the Son, nor the Son the Father, nor the Spirit the Father or the Son. Unity should never be understood as sameness but rather harmonious particularity. While there are real differences between God as he is in himself and our human relations, Paul does seem to invoke an analogy here.

Though Jeff and Jay are two of my best friends, our friendship grows not because we become more alike each other but because we learn to glory in our various gifts, callings, and differences. Our goal should not be to make the other our clone. Rather, we are called to enjoy the other as they by the Spirit seek to respond to the Savior in their particularity, and in so doing seek to bring a fuller sense of unity and completion to the whole.

Unity is about harmonious particularity that cultivates solidarity in the midst of our ongoing distinctness. Let us, moved by the Spirit, come together to unite our hearts in worship and our purposes in service to the king and his kingdom. When we do this, there is a very public manifestation of the Spirit for all to see.

**Kelly M. Kapic** is professor of theological studies at Covenant College in Lookout Mountain, Georgia. He is the author or editor of ten books, including *God So Loved, He Gave* (Zondervan), *Communion with God* (Baker Academic), and *A Little Book for New Theologians* (IVP Academic).