



THE MESSAGE BOARD
A Newsletter from
A. Roy Medley, General Secretary



Personal Reflections

Volume 50 – August 1, 2010

BWA Congress 2010
“Pursuing a Theme”

Part 3

On the opening night of the Congress, David Coffey, president of the Baptist World Alliance, opened the theme of “Hear the Spirit” with these observations:

“We can be a purpose-driven church. We can be a seeker-sensitive church. We can be an emergent and creative church. We can be a justice-and-peace church. We can be a conservative Calvinist church. But if we fail to hear the Holy Spirit of the living God, then all our serving will be futile and fruitless.” He added, “Baptists run the risk of having ‘the appointing without the anointing.’”

The next morning Bible study leader Dr. Alistair Brown of Northern Baptist Theological Seminary asked, “Why are Baptists afraid of the Spirit?”

It brought to mind the question a teenager asked me many years ago when I was doing youth ministry, “Will the Holy Spirit make you do crazy things?” Mind you, this was in the era of films such as “The Exorcist” and the beginning of the charismatic renewal movement. My response was, “Only if you think Jesus was crazy, because the primary task of the Holy Spirit in our lives is to make us more like Jesus.” That doesn’t mean that the Spirit does not act in other ways as well, for the well-being of the believer, the church and the world.

If we are honest, there are probably several responses we could give to the question of “why this fear of the Spirit.” One response certainly is that our culture and, therefore, our worldview have been deeply impacted by modernism with its emphasis upon rationality. One way to think of much of the perceived task of theology in the late 19th and early 20th centuries is that it was to “rationalize” the Christian faith in order to remove the scandal of it being unscientific. In this task, both ultra-liberalism and fundamentalism were trapped by the same modern worldview. And each in its own way provided its grounds for the proofs of faith that conformed to modern thought. In both, the mystery of the holy became a victim of modernity.

Another response we could give to the question about “why the fear of the Spirit” is one offered during the morning BWA Bible study: control. Control is a big thing in Western culture because control equals power, whether it be power over ourselves, power over others, or power over circumstances. We like to be in control. If the Spirit is seen as an alien force that overcomes our will and corresponds to “The Invasion of the Body Snatchers,” that, indeed, is a fearful prospect.

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But, nowhere in Scripture do we see that God's purpose is to make of us remote-controlled robots. That, in itself, would be to destroy the very image of God stamped upon every one of us. If the Spirit is understood as the expression of the love which interpenetrates and flows among and from the Holy Trinity, then this fear is removed. Love never violates the beloved. Love may overwhelm us; love may sweep us up into ecstasy; love may change our minds and our hearts—but in doing so, it never destroys us nor our ability to say "yes" or "no."

A third response that could be given is that we have too often seen claims of "the Spirit led me to do this" or "believe this," that were mere window dressings for self-will or that bordered on the magical or mental illness. One of my wisest seminary professors stated in his class on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit something I have never forgotten. "The surest sign of the presence of the Spirit is struggle, not peace." What he was pointing to is the reality that as long as we live in this world, our lives and our wills shall always be in tension with the movement of the Spirit. Like prophesy, we sometimes will not recognize the leading of the Spirit until much later. There are moments of absolute certainty, but those for me have been rare and usually have come after much struggle and have usually taken me in a direction that was not my predilection. For most of us, that tension between our will and the will of God remains always a source of humility in our lives and in our claims of Spirit-leading. Even the holiest among us continually struggle to open themselves ever more fully to God and neighbor through repentance, surrender and the concrete expression of love, in order to more perfectly express the will of God in our lives.

As we walk with Christ, let our prayer be that the fruit of the Spirit—"love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control"—might emerge ever more abundantly within us.



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