

The Holy Spirit and Unity
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Introduction

Pentecostals are “anonymous ecumenicists.”¹ The origins of Pentecostalism are ecumenical in character. It started as a revival movement that transcended denominational boundaries as it conceived itself as the answer to Jesus’ prayer in John 17.² The root of this ecumenical approach is the work of the Spirit as evidenced in the praxis of the church. It is a unity expressed in the life of Spirit-filled Christians.

However, what happened among Pentecostals is a lesson for us, and they are perhaps an analogue of our own history in some quarters. As they aligned themselves with Fundamentalism and organized into institutions, they lost their sense of “Spirit ecumenicism.” Their Fundamentalist understanding of Scripture, the hostility of other Christian traditions to Pentecostalism, and a kind of institutionalized spiritual elitism fostered an exclusivistic stance among them.³ The Spirit-ed-ecumenical heart collided with the Fundamentalist head.

Later, however, the second and third waves of the Holy Spirit—as they are commonly called—renewed an ecumenical life within Pentecostalism as the life of the Spirit reached across denominational and traditional boundaries. From the Full Gospel Business Men’s Fellowship to the Vineyard Movement, the experience of the Spirit has united believers from various traditions in such a way that their denominational heritages recede into the background. The Spirit-filled life trumped those boundaries even though many remained in their traditions. But what they experienced in the Spirit gave them eyes to see beyond their own traditions and recognize a more fundamental unity in the Spirit. This is part the reason they are, according to Philip Jenkins, “the most successful social movement of the past century.”⁴ By 2025, it is estimated that one billion will live in the Global South.⁵

I have been tasked with reflecting on the role the Holy Spirit in the unity of the church with a particular focus on what resources exist in our common tradition for communal reflection on this topic. Is there anything that might parallel what we find in Pentecostalism’s heritage?

¹ Veli-Matti Karkkainen, “Anonymous Ecumenicists? Pentecostals and the Struggle for Christianity Identity,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 37 (Winter 2000) 13-27; Cf. Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *Toward a Pentecostal Theology: Pentecostal and Ecumenical Perspectives on Ecclesiology, Soteriology, and Theology of Mission* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2002).

² Cecil M. Robeck, Jr., “Taking Stock of Pentecostalism: The Personal Reflections of a Retiring Editor,” *Pneuma* 15.1 (1993) 37.

³ On the Fundamentalist point, see Walter J. Hollenweger, *The Pentecostals: The Charismatic Movement in the Churches*, tr. By R. A. Wilson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson and Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1972).

⁴ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (3rd ed.; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 10.

⁵ Grant McClung, “Pentecostals: The Sequel,” *Christianity Today*, available at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/april/7.30.html>

Stone-Campbell Resources:

At the origins of the Stone-Campbell Movement are at least two themes that resonate for many in the Stone-Campbell tradition and create an ecumenical trajectory. One is clearly more associated with Stone while the other is strongly present in both.

1. *Revivalism*. If Cane Ridge is America's Pentecost, then the resources for reflection may parallel what happened at the beginning of the twentieth century in the birth of Pentecostalism. There are some important similarities. As Stone learned in the Great Western Revivals, the work of the Spirit is not bounded by creedal confessions. Stone's early experiences at the sacramental meetings in 1801 encouraged the perspective that the Spirit works through the hearing of the gospel despite the creedal differences between preachers. He saw this in the revivals. "Many old and young, even little children, professed religion, and all declared the same simple gospel of Jesus. I knew the voice and felt the power."⁶ Stone recognized the work of God in the spiritual exercises of the Spring 1801 Logan County revivals. The activity of the Spirit was not limited by creedal commitments.

2. *Transformation*. The true Christian is the transformed one who confesses Christ. The importance of Christian character in the early Stone-Campbell Movement cannot be underestimated. It is the supreme value after the confession of Christ, and it is more valued than baptism itself. Campbell wrote: "And while I would not lead the most excellent professor of any sect to disparage the least of all of the commandments of Jesus, I would say to my immersed brother as Paul said to his Jewish brother who gloried in a system which he did not adorn: 'Sir, will not his uncircumcision, or unbaptism, be counted to him for baptism?'"⁷ The text of the Lunenburg letter reveals the point:

"I cannot, therefore, make any one duty the standard of Christian state or character, not even immersion into the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and in my heart regard all that have been sprinkled in infancy without their own knowledge and consent, as aliens from Christ and the well-grounded hope of heaven....

"Should I find a Paedobaptist more giving the preference of my heart *is* to him that loveth most. Still I will be asked, How do I know that any one loves my Master but by his obedience to his commandments? I answer, *In no other way*. But mark, I do not substitute obedience to one commandment, for universal or even for general obedience. And should I see a sectarian Baptist or a more spiritually-minded, more generally conformed to the requisitions of the Messiah, than one who precisely acquiesces with me in the theory or practice of immersion as I teach, doubtless the former rather than the latter, would have my cordial approbation and love as a Christian. So I judge, and so I feel. It is the image of Christ the Christian looks for and loves and this does not consist in being exact in a few items, but in general devotion to the whole truth as far as known."⁸

⁶ Barton W. Stone, *A Reply to John P. Campbell's Strictures on Atonement* (Lexington: Joseph Charles, 1805), 6. Newell Williams, *Barton Stone: A Spiritual Biography* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), 49-64, details this experience and Stone's shift in a chapter entitled "I Knew the Voice..."

⁷ Alexander Campbell, "Any Christians Among the Sects?" *Millennial Harbinger* (1837) 565.

⁸Alexander Campbell, "Any Christians Among Protestant Parties," *Millennial Harbinger* (1837) 412.

Unity, according to Barton W. Stone, is not located in creeds (head), book (Bible), or water (baptism), but in fire (Holy Spirit). This is a transformative experience of the Holy Spirit who leads us “to love God and his children—to love and pray for all mankind.” He writes: “How vain are all human attempts to unite a bundle of things together, so as to make them grow together, and bear fruit! They must first be united with the living stock, and receive its sap, and spirit, before they can ever be united with each other. So must we be first united with Christ, receive his spirit, before we can ever be in spirit united with one another.”⁹

Stone’s language recognizes that there is someone more fundamental than creed, Bible or water. There is a spiritual dynamic, a spiritual unity, which gives rise to more visible forms of unity. The Holy Spirit is the root dynamic. And the first expression of this unity is a transforming faith through which all believers might find themselves already united.

The Theological Root of Unity: Participation in the Divine Life

The classical way of framing God’s relationship to humanity (the economic Trinity) is that the Father works through the Son in the Spirit. The Father, for example, indwells humanity through the Son in the Spirit. By the Spirit we are the habitation of God (Ephesians 2:18-22).

More specifically, our experience of the Father and Son is mediated through the presence and “communion of the Holy Spirit” (2 Corinthians 13:13). Through the communion of the Spirit we participate in the mutual love or perichoretic unity (mutual indwelling) of the Triune God. Generally, three theses summarize the significance of this statement for the purpose of this paper. Each of these deserves extensive attention but is only minimally stated here.

1. Unity among believers is a divine initiative, created by and located in the divine life.
2. Unity among believers is enabled and empowered by divine agency.
3. Unity among believers is the experience of the divine life.

This unity is a “unity of the Spirit”—created and empowered by the Spirit and the Spirit is the one in whom we experience that unity. The Spirit is the creative power of God who breathes life into both the present age and the age to come (new creation). The Spirit empowers our relationships so that we might embody the Spirited-life of Jesus in our lives. The Spirit deepens our grasp and “knowledge” (experience) of the love of God through presence (Ephesians 4:14-20). The Spirit is the very means of our communion with each other and with God.

The Visible Practice of Unity—A Praxis Orientation

My purpose in this section is to offer five (yes, count them, *five*) modes of visible unity that give expression to the underlying unity of the Spirit among believers. These are matters of praxis that not only exhibit the unity of the Spirit but are also means by which the Spirit dynamically works among believers for unity. These practices have an instrumental

⁹ Barton W. Stone, “The Retrospective,” *Christian Messenger* 7 (October 1833) 314-16.

function in relation to the Spirit. The Spirit acts through them to manifest the unity that the Spirit has already achieved. At the same time these practices are also transformative as they move us not only into a deeper experience and recognition of that unity but also function to transform us as exhibits of that unity.

At the same time, I hope to also draw on some Stone-Campbell resources in my articulation of these five means of Spirit-enacted unity. It is, therefore, quite appropriate to limit them to “five.”

1. Confession – we confess Jesus is Lord by the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:3).

Paul provides the ground of this point: “No one is able to say “Jesus is Lord” except by (in) the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:3). Contextually, this stands in contrast with those who say “Jesus is cursed” or who serve idols. This is an orienting confession. It is a centered-set confession, that is, we confess Jesus at the center of our faith journey. It is a directional confession, that is, we have turned our face toward Jesus and we walk toward him. But none of this is possible except by the work of the Spirit. The confession arises out of the Spirit’s work, operates within the life of the Spirit, and lives because we have all drunk of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13).

From the beginning, the Stone-Campbell Movement has insisted that the prerequisite for baptism is the simple confession of Peter in Matthew 16:16. “Jesus is Lord” or “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God” has been a sufficient baptismal confession for entrance into the community of faith.

Alexander Campbell’s clearest articulation of this is his essay, published in the *Christian System*, “Foundation of Christian Union.” He calls “Jesus is the Christ” the “fundamental fact.” The one who “believes the testimony that Jesus is the Christ is begotten by God, may overcome the world, has eternal life, and is, on the veracity of God, saved from his sins.”¹⁰ This confession is the foundation of Christian unity. There is no other foundation.

This confession is, however, made in a context. I believe this context is essentially what is called the Apostle’s Creed or the developing *Regula Fidei* of the early church. It gives shape to the confession of the lordship of Jesus and locates believers in the flow of the history of God’s people. We recognize the work of the Spirit in the development of that confession that is both rooted in the witness of Scripture and the witness of the early church. We confess the Father as creator, Jesus as the Son of God, and the Holy Spirit as the communion of believers.

Theologically, we acknowledge that whoever confesses “Jesus is Lord” does so “in (or by) the Spirit.” We recognize the work of the Spirit in the confession itself. Whenever we hear Jesus confessed, or the Triune faith articulated, we confess that the Spirit is at work. We may embrace the unity of believers through this confession that is the result of the Spirit’s enabling presence.

2. Transformation – we are sanctified by the Spirit (1 Thessalonians 4:3-8).

We all know Jesus’ saying “by their fruits you will know them” (Matthew 7:16). Sanctification is a work that belongs to the Holy Spirit who indwells, empowers and gifts us for new life in Christ.

¹⁰ Alexander Campbell, “Foundation of Christian Union,” *Christian System* (1839), 101.

Both Stone and Campbell stressed the importance of transformation in the life of the believer and as the particular evidence of one's relationship to God—as the previous quotations from both Stone and Campbell demonstrate. They both recognized transformation as the work of the Spirit. Campbell's theology, perhaps, is not as well known on this point as Stone's.

Stone quotes Matthew 7:16 as evidence of this statement: "All were admitted to fellowship that believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, and obeyed him; and their obedience was considered the best evidence of their faith." This is the "term of fellowship."¹¹

In his essay entitled "Christian System," Campbell articulates a vision of the work of the Spirit in transformation (sanctification) in his section entitled "Gift of the Holy Spirit." This comes in the section of the "Christian System" that is still dealing with the "facts" of the Christian story. In other words, it is the work of God. "The Holy Spirit," he writes, "is, then, the author of all our holiness" as the believers are "quickened, animated, encouraged, and sanctified by the power and influence of the Spirit of God, working in" us.¹²

Stone combines our first and second points nicely in this statement: "We are neither Pedo-Baptists, Arians nor Socinians; yet God forbid that we should reject or despise any of these little ones that believe in Jesus as an all-sufficient Saviour, and who proves the sincerity of is faith by a holy walk and conversation."¹³

Theologically, transformation is the goal of God's agenda. Transformation is an effect of communion. Through mutual indwelling, we are transformed by the presence of the Spirit in our lives. The fruit of the Spirit, then, is evidence of our union with God. The fruit of the Spirit is the life of the Spirit already present in us. We may embrace the unity of believers through shared sanctification or mutually experienced transformation that is the result of the enabling presence of the Spirit.

3. Liturgy – we worship in the Spirit (John 4:24; Philippians 3:3).

Liturgy seems like the last thing to put on the table in unity dialogues. Liturgy is where "disunity becomes explicit and the sense of separation most acute" in ecumenical discussions.¹⁴ Perhaps we should avoid this point like the plague, but I think that would be a mistake.

The foundation of liturgy—not necessarily the foundation of liturgical forms—is the work of the Spirit. Our liturgical acts—not necessarily our liturgical forms—are deeply rooted in the work of the Spirit. Assembly, as communal praise and worship, is mediated by

¹¹ Barton W. Stone, "Objections to Christian Union Calmly Considered," *Christian Messenger* 1 (December 25 1826) 27.

¹² Campbell, "Christian System," *Christian System*, 49.

¹³ Barton W. Stone, "To the Editors of the Baptist Recorder," *Christian Messenger* 1 (August 25 1827) 225. Cf. Stone, "The Christian Expositor," *Christian Messenger* 1 (July 25 1827) 203: "The sinner by faith is represented as grafted into Christ, the living vine—by this he becomes united to Christ and by this union he receives the life, the spirit, and support of Christ, as the branch does from the vine with which it is united. The believer is as dependent upon Christ for support, for life, for the spirit and the fruits of the spirit, as the branch is on the vine. 'For by faith they stand,' 'and without me ye can do nothing.' Let it be well remembered that before faith there is no ingrafting into Christ, no union with him, no divine life, no holy spirit received, no fruits of the spirit borne."

¹⁴ Faith and Order (Lund, 1952), quoted by Teresa Berger, "Worship in the Ecumenical Movement," in *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, ed. by Nicholas Lossky, et. al. (Geneva: WCC, 1991), 1107.

the Spirit. We worship the Father through the Son in the Spirit.¹⁵ Assembly, as an eschatological, transforming and sacramental encounter with God, happens in the Spirit; it is a pneumatic event. This is what gives significance and meaning to Assembly, and it is also the root of the unity we experience through Assembly as the whole church—throughout time and space—are gathered before the throne of the Father in the Spirit.

Liturgy was important for both Stone and Campbell. They both recognized the value of assembly for transformation, education and community. While Campbell stressed the “ancient order” as a means—not a test of fellowship—for enriching the happiness of Christians, social/communal praise of God in the presence of God was a focal point of Christian identity for both Stone and Campbell. Campbell, for example, confessed a “deep and solemn conviction that the [assembly] is the house of God—the temple of the Holy Spirit—and that we are, especially and emphatically, in the presence of the Lord while we are engaged in his worship.”¹⁶

But have not the heirs of Stone-Campbell divided over liturgical practices? It would seem this would be the last place to start and, in fact, the very item on the agenda to avoid. Yet this very point arose in Campbell’s earliest discussions of the “ancient order.” This was implicitly raised in the *Christian Baptist* by one of Campbell’s critics. Spencer Clack, the editor of the *Baptist Recorder*, wondered whether Campbell’s “ancient order” functioned similarly to the written creeds to which Campbell mightily objected.¹⁷ Campbell’s response is illuminating. He maintained that his “ancient order” was no creed precisely because he had “*never made them, hinted that they should be, or used them as a test of christian character or terms of christian communion.*”¹⁸

Despite Campbell’s caveat, this might not appear to be a very fruitful approach to ecumenical dialogue given the Stone-Campbell historic emphases on biblical liturgical practices. The point will turn on whether or not we are able to discern the role of the Spirit in liturgy that transcends the specific forms. If we take seriously the point—made in the Gospel of John—that the Spirit vivifies all life, sacrament and worship in such a way that the reality is rooted in the work of the Spirit rather than in the specific form, then we can move beyond binding the Spirit to that form. There are no fixed forms that bind the Spirit. Rather there are gracious gifts—even specific forms—through which the Spirit offers communion and grace (e.g., sacraments). We may have preferred forms or even think some forms more biblical or more theologically coherent, but the forms are not boundaries for the Spirit.

To recognize that the Spirit is the means by whom we commune with and experience God, and that this means is not dependent upon perfectionistic obedience to specified forms, and that the Spirit is not limited by forms, enables us to affirm the presence of the Spirit among those communities who do not share the forms that we think are most biblical. We may embrace the unity of believers (worshippers) through our eschatological and sacramental encounter with God in assembly by the enabling presence of the Spirit.

¹⁵ I have defended this point in *A Gathered People: Revisioning the Assembly as Transforming Encounter*, co-authored with Bobby Valentine and Johnny Melton (Abilene: Leafwood Publishers, 2007), 129-150.

¹⁶ Campbell, “Worshipping Assemblies—No. I,” *Millennial Harbinger*, New Series 3 (October 1839) 441.

¹⁷ Spencer Clack, *Christian Baptist* 5 (6 August 1827) 359-360.

¹⁸ Alexander Campbell, *Christian Baptist* 5 (3 September 1827) 369-370, emphasis mine.

4. *Practicing the Kingdom of God – we minister in the power of the Spirit (Luke 4:18-19).*

Spirit Christology is particularly important in Luke. The Spirit anoints Jesus, leads him into the wilderness and empowers him for ministry in Luke 3-4. This is the ministry of the kingdom of God in which Jesus practices the kingdom of God by heralding the good news of the kingdom, exercising authority over the principalities and powers, and healing brokenness. Jesus is sent, and he sends a people.

This is the missional ministry into which believers are called. This praxis is an expression of the life of the Spirit within the community, and the community of Jesus empowered by the Spirit continues the teaching and doing of Jesus, that is, they continue to practice the kingdom of God.

When believers practice the kingdom of God, the Spirit is present. Where the Spirit is present, Jesus is present. This manifests the unity of the Spirit through praxis. It is a missional ecumenism. We may embrace the unity of believers through shared ministry (shared participation in the good news of the kingdom of God) by the enabling presence of the Spirit.

5. *Spiritual Formation Practices – we pray in the Spirit (Jude 20).*

In Luke's Gospel "the kingdom comes as the Spirit works in response to prayer."¹⁹ This connects points four and five, but it also calls us deeper into the experience of prayer itself.

The unity of believers through the presence of the Spirit in prayer is a common theme in the history of spirituality. Throughout that history we see evidence of the presence of the Spirit in communal and individual experiences. This is where an acquaintance, if not a full immersion in, the history of spirituality might open doors for ecumenical conversations.

Barton W. Stone, though perhaps unacquainted with the history of spirituality, was not unacquainted with the reality of the Spirit in prayer. He regarded prayer as a means that offers a "habitual sense of the presence and inspection of God, and of our entire dependence upon him, which is the foundation of a holy life." This presence is "direct and immediate."²⁰ He writes:

The denial of the direct operation of the Spirit cuts the very nerves of prayer...Such a doctrine stands opposed to the spirit and practice of Jesus, our pattern, to the doctrines and example of the apostles and primitive saints, and to the experience of every living Christian. We can conceive of no doctrine more dangerous to the souls of men, than that, which tends to check and destroy the spirit of prayer. Such a doctrine stands opposed to the spirit and practice of Jesus, our pattern—to the doctrine and example of his apostles and primitive saints, and to the experience of every living christian. Prayer is the means by which we receive the grace of God, and enjoy sacred communion with the Father and the son. Enjoying this we have communion one with another, and grow up into Christ our living head in all things.²¹

¹⁹ Michael W. Goheen, *A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 96-100. Cf. Stephen S. Smalley, "Spirit, Kingdom and Prayer in Luke-Acts," *Novum Testamentum* 15 (January 1973) 59-71.

²⁰ Barton W. Stone, "On Prayer," *Christian Messenger* 1 (25 August 1827) 235

²¹ Barton W. Stone, "On Prayer," 236.

Theologically, we recognize that the practice of prayer (as well as other disciplines) is rooted in the work of the Spirit. The Spirit is present to listen and speak in these moments. When a community practices them together, or each member of a community practices them in their own walk with God, the Spirit works to unite through shared experiences and shared communion. We may embrace the unity of believers through the shared experience and communion in prayer by the enabling presence of the Spirit.

Conclusion: Unity, Eschatology and the Church

The full mutual indwelling of believers in the life of God is God's goal (*telos*) for humanity. It is, however, an eschatological goal effected by the eschatological reality of the fully realized kingdom of God. Unity is already realized in the communion of the Holy Spirit but the full experience of that unity awaits the fullness of the kingdom of God. Unity in the present age is always flawed and marred, and it never fully reflects the reality of God's communion with us.

The present experience of visible unity, however, is progressive (though not always evident). The present is a not "perfect" manifestation of the eschatological *telos*. Consequently, we pursue unity, just as we pursue sanctification. The church is constantly undergoing a process of communal sanctification parallel to the process of individual sanctification. It should not surprise us that the church is not united in experience since we all acknowledge our own progressive sanctification.

At the same time, however, we are not left with nothing. Though we have not yet experienced the fullness of our unity with God and with each other—and we will not until the eschaton, we do—even now—experience that future when we give space to the presence of the Spirit. We are already united, and we progressively experience that reality the more the Spirit sanctifies our communities and our lives. The present practice of visible unity though marred by brokenness is healed by mercy; it is hindered by human brokenness but empowered by the gifts the Spirit offers to the church, which include the five gifts listed above.

Through the practice of these gifts, the Spirit mediates a proleptic experience of that unity. Together, we confess Jesus is Lord; together, we seek transformation; together, we participate in the eschatological assembly; together, we practice the kingdom of God; and together, we pray in the Spirit. Yes, you counted correctly. The number is five.