

Is Depression a
Spiritual Failing?

The Violent Pastor

No, We Can't Rush
Jesus' Return

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THE
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FOR ADVENTIST USE ONLY?

We don't control the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit controls us.

By Stephen Chavez

FOR MOST OF THE LAST DECADE, SEVENTH-day Adventist church leaders at the highest levels have hammered the necessity of revival and reformation. The height of this obsession was perhaps demonstrated most starkly in March 2021, when 10 pages in *Adventist World* magazine featured messages from General Conference presidents Charles H. Watson (1930-1936), James L. McElhany (1936-1950), Robert H. Pierson (1966-1979), and Ted N. C. Wilson (2010 to the present). Each urged rank-and-file Adventists to put away worldly interests and pray for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit so that Jesus can come.

This passion demonstrates a conceit that salvation history—indeed, the fate of the entire universe—depends on the faithfulness of Adventists proclaiming “the eternal gospel ... to those who live on the earth—to every nation, tribe, language and people” (Rev. 14:6, NIV¹).

It also implies that only Seventh-day Adventists can be trusted with the Holy Spirit, as if the Holy Spirit can be bottled and marketed “for Adventist use only.”

Born, and Born Again

One of the most instructive and descriptive conversations about the Holy Spirit happened during Jesus’ interview with Nicodemus (John 3).

First comes Jesus’ assertion: “No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again” (verse 3). Then, after some back and forth, Jesus tells Nicodemus, “No one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit” (verse 5).

Jesus affirms that we don’t control the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit controls us. “The wind blows wherever it pleases,” he says. “You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit” (verse 8). The idea is that manifestations of the Holy Spirit are as varied as the believers who are born of the Spirit.

This conversation takes us, a few verses later, to one of Jesus’ most unambiguous and memorable statements: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned” (verses 16-18).

Notice the progression. Belief and baptism—“of water and the Spirit”—lead to eternal life (verse 5). Freedom from condemnation leads to being born of the Spirit (verse 6). How many Adventists believe that baptism is the end-goal of being believers? How many know that living by the power of the Holy Spirit is where the action is—and that living by the Spirit is when the adventure begins?

I’ve spent most of my life being educated by and working for the Adventist Church. It breaks my heart to remember the doubts I had about my own salvation and how often the conversations I’ve had with friends and parishioners have expressed some form of doubt that we are worthy of salvation. We were so obsessed about our salvation that the adventure of living for Christ and being filled with the Spirit was lost on us. When we were encouraged to pray for the Holy Spirit, it was with the understanding that only our lukewarmness was preventing Jesus from returning. Or that if we prayed hard enough, the Holy Spirit would somehow energize our efforts, like a cup of Gatorade helps power a runner to the finish line.

Gifted for Service

During his ministry, Jesus embodied all the gifts of the Spirit. He taught; he healed; he prophesied; he performed miracles; he encouraged, etc. He was limited only in terms of geography, in that he could be in only one place at a time.

When Jesus began to speak about his absence, he told his disciples to expect the Holy Spirit in his place. He said, “The Spirit will receive from me what he will make known to you” (John 16:15). When we are baptized with the Holy Spirit, we demonstrate everywhere we go the gifts of the Spirit: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecies, generosity, encouragement, etc. Jesus isn’t physically present, but through his Holy Spirit, the church as the body of Christ touches people’s lives with the power of the gospel.

When Christians in the early church went from place to place preaching the gospel, they made themselves available to the Holy Spirit. They knew they didn’t control the Holy Spirit; under the right conditions, the Holy Spirit controlled them. They often saw the restrictions they had placed upon themselves shattered in the process.

Philip, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, found himself on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza, where he met an Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40). Philip joined the man in conversation and had the opportunity to tell him about Jesus.

Paul, on his way to persecute believers in Damascus, was hijacked by a light so bright that its force threw him to the ground and for a time blinded him. The Spirit said about him, “This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings” (Acts 9:15).

Peter, waiting for lunch to be served, saw in vision a sheet being lowered from heaven and heard the words, “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat” (Acts 10:13). Three times Peter replied, “I have never eaten anything impure or unclean” (verse 14). Three times Peter heard, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean” (verses 15-16).

Soon three men were there asking for Peter. He followed them to Caesarea, where he met Cornelius, a Roman

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centurion. Peter stated: “You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. *But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean*” (verse 28, emphasis mine).

Notice a theme? The Holy Spirit guided those believers out of their comfort zones to serve others in ways they never would have imagined. They understood that their mandate was not self-centered (i.e., Are we good enough? Are we devout enough?); they understood that their mandate was to share the gospel with those who didn’t know it, even if that meant breaking down barriers of race, gender, and social status. Theirs was a mission of inclusion, not exclusion. They knew they didn’t control the Holy Spirit; but when they made themselves available, the Holy Spirit controlled them.

It’s Personal

What about Nicodemus? Did he become a follower of Jesus? Did he go with the other disciples when they went out two by two? Did he invite Jesus to meet his friends? If so, we have no record of it. If not, it doesn’t mean that Nicodemus wasn’t being led by the Spirit. If Nicodemus wasn’t as active as the other disciples, it was because he was being led otherwise.

Nicodemus is mentioned two more times in John’s Gospel. Once Nicodemus asked his fellow Pharisees, “Does our law condemn a man without first hearing

him to find out what he has been doing?” (John 7:51). And after Jesus died, Nicodemus came forward with Joseph of Arimathea to claim the body of Christ (John 19:38-39). It seems that Nicodemus may have been an undercover disciple. If so, it means that we don’t have to serve in the spotlight to have our service for God’s kingdom validated.

It also means that being led by the Spirit isn’t so much to have a particular effect (such as facilitating the second coming) as much as it is simply being faithful to the Spirit’s leading, no matter how significant—or insignificant—the result.

Not long before the pandemic closed the General Conference building, a friend of mine suffered an unexpected and catastrophic loss. I sent a condolence card to her home. A couple of weeks later, I decided to walk to her cubicle to see how she was doing.

Her cubicle was empty when I got there, so I thought, *Oh well, I tried*. As I was heading back to my cubicle, I spotted her in the hallway, headed my way. “How are you doing?” I asked.

Without a word she wrapped me in a hug and started crying. We stepped into a nearby conference room, and I’ll never forget her tears that fell on the conference room table. We sat there for a few minutes without saying a word. When she stopped crying, I asked, “May I pray for you?” I prayed. Then she gave me a hug. I went back to my cubicle, and she went to hers.

Every day I try to make myself available to the Holy Spirit. I’m prepared to have my plans interrupted, because I don’t control the Holy Spirit. But when I’m available, the Holy Spirit controls me. **AT**

¹All Scriptures quoted in this article are from the New International Version.