

## Filled with the Spirit: Exploring the Pentecostal Witness

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Locating the Pentecostal Movement within the larger Protestant landscape is no easy task, since the Movement is vast and diverse. The central place of origin for the Pentecostal Movement at the turn of the twentieth century was the *Apostolic Faith Mission* on Azusa Street in Los Angeles. Many stories came from the revival of apostolic power for mission that was said to occur there over the months of the Mission's global popularity. Though this Mission in Los Angeles was the central hub of the early Pentecostal movement, Pentecostalism globally has many roots that may be traced back to a variety of Holiness, Pietistic, and Higher Life movements. The ethos of these movements influenced the fabric of Pentecostalism to this day. I will attempt to describe this fabric as I relate the Pentecostal witness to the larger Reformation heritage.

### *Deeds over Creeds*

The Founder of the Apostolic Faith Mission, William J. Seymour, wrote in his Mission's paper, *The Apostolic Faith*, that the new Pentecostal Movement "stands for the restoration of the faith once delivered to the saints."<sup>1</sup> Pentecostalism shared with the larger Protestant Movement the passion to restore to the churches something valuable that was lost in the history of the church.

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<sup>1</sup> William J. Seymour, "The Apostolic Faith Movement," *Apostolic Faith*, 1:1 (Sept., 1906): 2.

There was an effort to return to the biblical text to hear with fresh ears and to see with fresh eyes. The Pentecostals and their Protestant forerunners were *restorationist* in some way, meaning that, in a sense, they understood the best way *forward* as a *return* to that which was vital to the founding of the Church.

The precise nature of what was needed to be restored, however, varied. The Pentecostals accented the infilling and power of the Spirit in life, so they followed the radical wing of the Reformation by stressing the restoration of the life of faith as needed to properly fulfill confessional orthodoxy. Seymour wrote in the preamble of his Mission's paper: "We are not fighting men or churches, but seeking to displace dead forms and creeds and wild fanaticisms with living, practical Christianity. 'Love, faith, unity' are our watchwords."<sup>2</sup> As with the Reformers, Seymour saw the Pentecostal renewal as for the entire church and not as the founding of a particular sect within it. Within the winds of spiritual renewal, the Pentecostals did not want to eliminate forms of worship or creedal affirmations. However, they wanted to rediscover the original purpose of church forms as occasions for the free and overflowing work of the divine Spirit. They wanted confessional affirmations that arose from an authentic participation in the life of faith.

Interestingly, the Pentecostal desire to stress deeds over creeds was difficult to maintain. The occasion soon arose that demanded creedal affirmation. Within two decades of the Movement's history, Pentecostalism was embroiled in doctrinal controversies that threatened the unity of the young Movement. Most significantly, the so-called Apostolic Pentecostals maintained that baptism was to be practiced in Jesus' name only rather than in

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They then sought to harmonize this Jesus-name baptism with the triadic baptismal formula of Matthew 28. They concluded that Jesus' name is the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit implied in the triadic baptismal formula. This conclusion then resulted in their belief that "Father, Son, and Spirit" are not eternal persons but rather functional titles of the one person of God incarnated in Jesus. They ended up becoming modalistic in their understanding of the Trinity. The Trinitarian Pentecostals who were in communion with the Apostolics engaged in conversation with them for more than a year before acting to creedally exclude them. This act of exclusion cut against their grain, but they were compelled to disrupt their unity in life and service in favor of a creedal difference. Their conviction, however, was that theirs was not a dead creed but one that expressed a living faith in the triune God. The Apostolics, sometimes called Oneness Pentecostals, presently make up about twenty-five percent of the global Pentecostal Movement. Ecumenical conversations between them and Trinitarian Pentecostals are ongoing.<sup>3</sup>

### *Filled with the Spirit*

Some think that the struggle with the Apostolics over Christology and the Trinity was inevitable, since a focus on the life of the Spirit will inevitably raise larger questions about Christ and God. Indeed, Pentecostals have always cultivated a Christological focus in their spirituality. Christ's atonement and resurrection were always highlighted as the powerful victory that became the wellspring of the Spirit's saving and healing work in the church. We drink from Christ's fullness in being filled with the Spirit and we are thereby shaped in his image. Seymour thus wrote: "let

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<sup>3</sup> For my analysis of this see, Frank D. Macchia, "The Oneness-Trinitarian Pentecostal Dialogue: Exploring the Diversity of Apostolic Faith," *Harvard Theological Review*, 103:3 (July, 2010): 329-349.

us lift up Christ to the world in all his fullness... in healing and salvation from all sin.”<sup>4</sup> Donald W. Dayton rightly noted that the belief in Jesus as Savior, Spirit Baptizer, Healer, and Coming King serves to structure Pentecostal writings about the work of the Spirit.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, the overwhelming emphasis of the Pentecostals was still on the reality and experience of being filled with the Holy Spirit. Faith in their view was not a mere confession or intellectual belief but rather a response to the gospel enabled by the transforming work of the Spirit. Their stress was on the *experience of faith* in resistance to mere confessionalism. Their battle was thus not the exactly the same as Luther’s or Calvin’s. The Pentecostals were not seeking to discover the objective and certain foundation for faith in the midst of the uncertainties and ambiguities of Christian piety. Pentecostals sought instead the *experience of faith* in the midst of an overly intellectual understanding of faith as a mere confessional stance. This accent on the experience of faith took many forms among the movements that most directly influenced Pentecostalism. The Wesleyans emphasized the transformation of the affections into passions for holy love. Among the Pietists, attention was placed on the priority of new birth through the Word of God. The Higher Life movements highlighted spiritual awakenings involving repentance and new life. The Pentecostals were blessed by all of these spiritual accents but focused uniquely on the infilling and empowerment of the Holy Spirit for the expanding witness of the church. Of course, many within the orbit of these movements felt that they were preserving the original assumption of the Reformers that faith is a living response to God that partakes of Christ in all his fullness. Those involved later in the religions of

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<sup>4</sup> William J. Seymour, “River of Living Water,” *Apostolic Faith* 1:3 (November, 1906): 2.

<sup>5</sup> Donald W. Dayton, *The Theological Roots of Pentecostalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988).

the heart saw themselves as fulfilling this assumption by making it explicit and by highlighting its significance. They were expanding the Reformation desire to restore to the churches something neglected in the Apostolic witness.

The Pentecostals traced the message concerning the infilling and experience of the Holy Spirit to the promise of the Spirit in Joel chapter 2 and to its penultimate fulfillment at the Day of Pentecost in Acts chapter 2. Allow me to illustrate how this was done by looking briefly at the work of the Pentecostal evangelist, Aimee Semple McPherson. According to McPherson, the promise of the Spirit in Joel and fulfilled with power in Acts is the reality that must be restored to the church. She notes that the vision of the Pentecostal Movement from the beginning was to bring the church back to the original apostolic experience of the Spirit, which is meant for everyone in the church. One cannot regard the apostolic experience of the Spirit as unique, as though the Apostles were a spiritual elite whose experience of the Spirit was inaccessible to ordinary Christians. The goal was thus to make the church once again aware of the power of the Holy Spirit as an indwelling and overflowing presence. According to McPherson, This recovery of the apostolic experience of the Spirit is especially needed to deliver the church from the decay of mere confessionism. McPherson wrote that the God of Pentecost is not merely to be “confessed” or “professed;” God is also to be “possessed.”<sup>6</sup> She did not mean with this term “possession” that we can master or control God’s Spirit. Her overarching theme was rather the mighty outpouring of the Spirit by which God takes hold of

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<sup>6</sup> Aimee Semple McPherson, *This Is That: Personal Experiences, Sermons, and Writings of Aimee Semple McPherson, Evangelist* (Los Angeles: The Bridal Call Publishing House, 1919), 390-406, esp. 392.

us and transforms us into living witnesses of his presence in the world. Still, in God's possessing us, we come of our own choice to bear the Spirit.

This idea of willfully becoming a vessel of the Spirit was a common theme in early Pentecostal preaching. Pentecostals held that God has drawn near to us, not only because God has come to us in the person of Jesus Christ, but also (and especially) because God is now present in power as a flowing river of life into which human persons and communities are to be taken up and transformed into Christ's image. The work of the Spirit is for the Pentecostals, therefore, a neglected part of the "full gospel." In accepting the gospel, Christ is not only believed, he is also to be taken hold of in the Spirit so that we become like him, partake of his fullness, and join him in his mission. Consequently, participation in Christ through the life of the Spirit was not for the Pentecostals merely supplemental to the gospel or the means by which the gospel is affirmed. The Spirit's outpouring is rather vital to the substance of the good news itself. Indeed, the gospel means that through the Spirit, a sinful and alienated human life becomes the dwelling place of God, a living temple for God's glory and for a witness of that glory before the world. This pneumatological emphasis meant that Pentecostal preachers were most preoccupied with the issue of how one becomes the dwelling place of the Spirit.

There were doctrinal differences among the Pentecostals but they all held in common this passion for living in conscious awareness of the presence of the Spirit. As Walter Hollenweger noted, "...talk of 'the doctrine' of the Pentecostal churches is highly problematical. What unites the Pentecostal churches is not a doctrine but a religious experience, and this can

be interpreted and substantiated in many different ways.”<sup>7</sup> James Dunn has I think described well the ecumenical challenge of this emphasis on the experience of the Spirit as an indwelling presence. In his significant study on the baptism in the Spirit, in which he was critical of Pentecostal teaching, he also had this to say in its defense:

It is a sad commentary on the poverty of our own immediate experience of the Spirit that when we come across language in which the NT writers refer directly to the gift of the Spirit and to their experience of it, either we automatically refer it to the sacraments and can only give it meaning when we do so... or else we discount the experience as too subjective or mystical in favor of a faith which is essentially an affirmation of biblical propositions, or else we in effect psychologize the Spirit out of existence.<sup>8</sup>

By way of contrast, Dunn notes that “in earliest days of Christianity, possession of the Spirit was a fact of immediate perception..., a conscious experience.”<sup>9</sup>

### *Stages of Receiving the Spirit*

Dunn’s statements do expose a problem. How one comes to receive and experience the Spirit is difficult to define, as the Pentecostals were to discover. How did the Pentecostals come to wrestle with this problem? Can one’s journey into the life of the Spirit be mapped? Though Pentecostals believed that faith begins with the work of the Spirit, they also inherited from the Holiness Movement the belief that the Holy Spirit is received and experienced in precise “stages.” In their search to describe this process of infilling, the Pentecostals borrowed from established nomenclature in the area of soteriology. Terms like regeneration, sanctification, and Spirit baptism were transformed into stages in faith’s reception of the Spirit. Among the

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<sup>7</sup> Walter J. Hollenweger, “From Azusa Street to the Toronto Phenomenon” in *Pentecostal Movements as an Ecumenical Challenge*, Concilium, Jürgen Moltmann and Josef Kuschel (London: SCM Press, 1996), 7.

<sup>8</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (London: SCM Press, 1970), 225-226.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 149, 105.

earliest Pentecostals who came from the Holiness Movement, regeneration was viewed as an experience of new birth and sanctification as an experience of total cleansing and consecration unto God. The culmination of one's initiation to the full presence and power of the Holy Spirit, however, was termed the "baptism in the Holy Spirit." Here is where the Pentecostals reached for a term that was somewhat neglected in the history of theology. Usually held by the Pentecostals as distinct from the experiences of regeneration and sanctification, Spirit baptism was viewed as the full reception of the Spirit, resulting in deeper power for witness. Typical is Seymour's description of how the sinner becomes the vessel of the Spirit:

The Lord has mercy on him for Christ's sake and puts eternal life in his soul, pardoning him of his sins, washing away his guilty pollution, and he stands before God justified as though he had never sinned... Then...Jesus takes that soul that has eternal life in it and presents it to God for thorough cleansing and purging from all Adamic sin... Now he is on the altar for the fire of God to fall, which is the baptism with the Holy Ghost. It is the free gift upon the sanctified, cleansed heart.<sup>10</sup>

Notice how Seymour attempts to trace the phases through which the sinner becomes the dwelling place of the Spirit. First, there is the moment of faith which is described as a new birth experience, a reception of eternal life into the soul. One is justified within this embrace of the Spirit. Implied here is that regeneration is theologically prior to justification, because faith is itself a transforming experience. Then comes total cleansing and consecration, through which the believer is placed on the altar of sacrifice. One is consecrated wholly unto God and God's purposes in the world. But, more is needed according to Seymour. The believers require the

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<sup>10</sup> William J. Seymour, "The Way Into the Holiest," *Apostolic Faith* 1:2 (October, 1906): 4.

power to fulfill these divine purposes. They must be filled with divine love so as to become a channel of that love to others. To fulfill the experience of faith, the fire from heaven comes streaming down, which is viewed as the gift of power for the Christian life, especially, the life of witness in the world. This is the good news of the full gospel according to Seymour: The sinner is fully taken up into the embrace of the Holy Spirit of God and is turned into a mighty witness of Christ in the world. Our initial "conversion" from the world to God is now fulfilled through a "second conversion" from God back to the world for Christ's sake. The "fullness" of the Spirit resulted in the formation of a called and spiritually-gifted community that functions as a witness before the world of the coming Kingdom of God. The church as a communion in the Spirit is the missional church, the church for "others."

Seymour's vision of initiation to the Spirit was popular in the earliest years of the Movement. But not all Pentecostals came to accept every detail of Seymour's journey from regeneration to sanctification to Spirit baptism. As might be expected, controversy over these stages erupted within the first decade of the Movement's history. Pentecostals who came into the Movement from Reformed backgrounds did not view sanctification as concentrated on a single crisis experience. Sanctification for them was rather a lifelong process. Entry into the life of the Spirit was thus described by them as having only two major steps: regeneration and Spirit baptism. This difference from Seymour, however, is not as great as it may first appear. These Reformed Pentecostals were still influenced by the Wesleyan Holiness Movement to some extent, since they also emphasized consecration of life and often assumed that sanctification as a process does include dramatic breakthroughs in the holy life. Moreover, within the Reformed Pentecostal wing, the Apostolic Pentecostals (described above as modalistic in their view of the

Trinity) arrived very early at an integrated understanding of initiation to the life of the Spirit in which Spirit baptism was not viewed as distinct from regeneration. The Apostolics reduced initiation to the life of the Spirit to one complex step: The infilling of the Spirit was said to culminate a process of transformation involving repentance, faith, and water baptism. The Apostolics, however, agree with all Pentecostals that the reception or infilling of the Spirit culminates in an empowering experience that turns the community of Christ into a living witness.

The Wesleyan Pentecostal way illustrated by Seymour, the Reformed Pentecostal way, and the Apostolic Pentecostal way were not the only ways of mapping one's journey into the Spirit among the Pentecostals. But I have described these three in order to grant some idea of the confusing variety of options among Pentecostal groups for understanding our reception of the Spirit. Despite this variety, however, all Pentecostals accented the good news that sinful human beings can become bearers of the Spirit. All of them emphasized that the reception of the Spirit is life transforming from beginning to end. All Pentecostals stressed that the reception of the Spirit culminates in an experience of power for witness in the world. The focus on power was meant to involve the whole person, body and soul, mind and the subconscious depths. An accent thus was placed on the extraordinary gifts of the Spirit described in the New Testament, such as divine healing and speaking in tongues. Interestingly, such attention to these gifts is becoming a prominent part of the expansion of Christianity in the global South. As Philip Jenkins has noted: "The Christianity that is flourishing in the global South is a Christianity that looks very strange to Western eyes. It takes prophecy and spiritual healing very seriously.

Dreams, visions, trances are all notions that carry a good deal of currency in the countries in which Christianity is succeeding very dramatically.”<sup>11</sup>

Especially in the US, speaking in tongues was highlighted historically as the characteristic sign of this culminating experience of power for witness, though not all Pentecostals made this sign a necessary accompaniment of the experience. The challenge as many of us see it is in appreciating the gift of tongues and its sign value without making this gift the necessary evidence of spiritual empowerment. Most importantly, it is vital that this focus on spiritual power does not eclipse a prior emphasis on love. The power of the Spirit is the power of divine love. A number of early Pentecostal authors did refer to the experience of Spirit baptism as a baptism in divine love.<sup>12</sup> In fact, Seymour was clear that love was the chief sign of the presence of the Spirit in the Pentecostal church. Speaking in tongues was for Seymour of subordinate status. The many tongues of Pentecost functioned for Seymour to symbolize the fact that divine love crosses all boundaries of human existence in order to form a diverse community in which everyone is accepted, called, and empowered. It is clear that our ecumenical conversation partners have helped us to search our own tradition fruitfully for insights in all of these areas. In recent Pentecostal/Reformed conversations, the Pentecostals recognized that they must take care not to use one single gift or cluster of gifts referred to in the New Testament as superior to the others. The Reformed participants recognized in response that they have historically been

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<sup>11</sup> See interview with Jenkins at: <http://www.carnegiecouncil.org/resources/transcripts/136.html> . See also, Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, author unknown, “The Old Time Pentecost,” *Apostolic Faith*, 1:1 (Sept., 1906): 2, and, “Tongues as a Sign,” *Apostolic Faith*, 1:1 (Sept., 1906): 2.

too casual about the extraordinary gifts of the Spirit described in the New Testament and perhaps present among a growing number within the membership of their own churches.<sup>13</sup>

The fact that many Pentecostals attempt to describe regeneration, sanctification, and Spirit baptism as distinct “stages” in one’s reception of the Spirit is also problematic. Viewing these soteriological terms as “stages” in one’s reception of the Spirit can lead to elitism. Those who participate in Pentecostal power can end up thinking that they occupy a higher stage in the life of the Spirit. At any rate, the Spirit is a living person and not a substance that can be received in separately measured portions. A careful reading of Pentecostal sources will reveal that such ideas were in most cases not their intention. Ecumenical conversation partners who have written on the topic of Spirit baptism, such as Kilian McDonnell (from a Catholic perspective), have helped many of us to see that these “stages” should more appropriately be viewed as “dimensions” of life in the Spirit, all of which are potentially present in the life of the Spirit and may be experienced or “released” in life in different ways. I have specifically proposed viewing Spirit baptism as a kind of “root metaphor” of the entire life of the Spirit in which we participate by faith. We are born anew, justified, sanctified and empowered in the Spirit or from the depth and horizon of the Spirit poured out abundantly upon us in Christ and received in faith.<sup>14</sup>

#### *Pentecostals and the Reformation: An Expanding Light*

Interestingly, the popular Pentecostal understanding of regeneration, sanctification, and Spirit baptism as “experiences” in the believer’s reception of the Spirit also served as a grid

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<sup>13</sup> See the Final Report: “Word and Spirit, Church and World, The Pentecostal Reformed Dialogue, 1996-2000,” <http://www.warc.ch/dt/er1/20.html>

<sup>14</sup> See Frank D. Macchia, *Baptized in the Spirit: A Global Pentecostal Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006).

through which they understood the significance of Pentecostalism within the “expanding light” of the Protestant Reformation in history. Their individual experience of the Spirit was writ large into an interpretation of Protestant history. Pentecostals commonly saw themselves as participating in a long line of “Reformers” who sought to rediscover neglected features of the early apostolic witness. Luther and Calvin were credited with restoring to the church the great power of the atonement as the foundation for the justification of sinners. Wesley was then praised for writing about the great significance of consecration by the Spirit in which the believer totally yields to God. The Pentecostal movement was then viewed as the culmination of this trajectory by accenting the baptism in the Holy Spirit as that power that turns the church into a living witness for God in the world.

McPherson gives us a prominent example of this reading of the gradual restoration of the apostolic witness in history. She wrote that the prophet Joel not only foretold of the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, he also foresaw the erosion of a proper attention to the filling and power of the Spirit. The locust plague in Joel foreshadowed the erosion of attention to the Spirit in the history of the church. As a result, the experience of justification, sanctification, and Spirit baptism, along with the full spectrum of fruits and gifts of the Spirit, began to wane in the church during the “dark ages” or medieval period. Concerning this spiritual erosion she wrote bluntly: “...the gifts and fruits of the Spirit gone, the baptism of the Holy Spirit gone, separation and Holiness gone, justification by faith gone.”<sup>15</sup> According to McPherson, the outpouring of the Spirit in the latter days will bring the needed restoration from this spiritual erosion. This restoration began with Martin Luther. When Luther grasped the

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<sup>15</sup> McPherson, *This Is That*, 393.

powerful victory of Christ's atonement, it was as if "a great light fell from heaven."<sup>16</sup> Through his message, "life again began to surge through the trunk and limbs of the tree."<sup>17</sup> William Booth of the Salvation Army and John Wesley are then praised for their emphasis on consecration and holiness.<sup>18</sup> Lastly, the experience of Spirit baptism, especially as signified in gifts like speaking in tongues, brings the restoration of the damaged plant to completion. The healing of the church from the damage of the locust plague is now finding completion in this latter-day outpouring of the Spirit upon the church.

Of course, there are obvious limitations to this classical Pentecostal reading of church history and of the place of Pentecostalism within the expanding Protestant witness in history, as many Pentecostals involved in ecumenical discussions would readily conclude. The Catholic and Orthodox witness cannot be made invisible in this way or reduced to a period of "dark ages" or locust-plague erosion. And the location of Pentecostalism at the pinnacle of the Protestant witness in history is by implication triumphalist. Of course, Pentecostals are not the only ones who have read theological history in ways that highlight their own self-importance. But the mere fact that others are guilty of a similar limitation is no justification for our own limitations. As might be expected, more recent Pentecostal authors are seeking to locate the winds of Pentecostal renewal within a more expansive understanding of the work of the Spirit in history and in the world today. We are not the only Christian communities that have drawn attention to the presence and power of the Spirit in the Christian life. With all of this having been said, we cannot ignore the problem of the *Geistvergessenheit* in the history of theology in

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 390-406, esp. 396.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 396.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 398-399.

the West, and I appreciate the fact that Pentecostal men and women gave so much in helping us to remember!

### *Conclusion*

One could say that from the moment God breathed into the nostrils of Adam we were made for the Spirit, to be the Spirit's dwelling place and to move in the Spirit's liberty and power. All of the great preachers of the Pentecostal Movement have tried to stress this point. Though they appropriately highlighted the victory of Christ, they always managed in some way to come back around to the need to live in this victory ourselves by the power of the Spirit. I appreciate this Pentecostal emphasis on receiving and living by the power of the Spirit. Allow me to say why. First, the Pentecostals remind us that all soteriological categories have to do with the renewal of life in the Spirit, including justification by faith, sanctification, and, ultimately, glorification. I mention justification because, as Paul Tillich reminds us, the justified discover unambiguous life through the Spirit in the midst of ambiguous experience, and this is the "in spite of" affirmed in the Reformation.<sup>19</sup> I include glorification because Paul writes that those who are justified are glorified (Rom. 8:30). The resurrection body will be the *pneumatic* body that fully participates in the powerful liberty of the Spirit (1 Cor. 15:44; Rom. 8:18-23). The life of faith is from beginning to end a reaching for that liberty in the Spirit of the crucified and risen Christ. Second, the church is called to continuously strive for more of God, for an experience of the Spirit's presence in all dimensions of the life of faith. Though the soteriological terms used by Pentecostals are more than experiences, they still point to aspects

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<sup>19</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, V. 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 124-131. See my development of justification in the Spirit in, Frank D. Macchia, *Justified in the Spirit: Creation, Redemption, and the Triune God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010).

of life in the Spirit that can and should be experienced or “released” in life. Third, the church is called to discover the fullness of power precisely in its missionary life, or in its transformation into a gifted and mutually-edifying community that is called to bear witness of Christ in the world. And this power is full because it claims us in every dimension of our existence. If our hearts are restless until they are filled with the Spirit and moved by the Spirit, then we must continue to yield so as to receive, again and again.