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The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives, Dallas Willard

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Book Reviews



Gordon D. Fee, **God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul**, 967pp. including appendixes and indexes (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), reviewed by Markus McDowell.

Fee's contention is that contemporary churches have paid lip service to a theology of the Spirit, and that the Spirit is "largely marginalized in our actual life together as a community of faith" (1). The detailed study in this book is intended to show that the Spirit was a dynamic and experiential part of the Pauline churches. Although Fee's intended audience is the whole of the contemporary church, his criticisms are valid for the Churches of Christ, since the Holy Spirit has played a minimized role in the theology of the Restoration Movement (at least since the divestiture of the Stone influence).

After a brief introduction, the book begins with a discussion of Pauline terms having to do with the Spirit. The largest section of the book is next: a detailed commentary on the Spirit verses in Paul's writings. The last 100 pages are a synthesis of the material, where Fee systematizes and draws conclusions about Paul's theology of the Spirit and makes a modern application.

The introduction lays out what Fee hopes to accomplish and why he wrote the book. This includes an interesting discussion of the Spirit as "Person." "We tend to think of him in nonpersonal terms. At which point our images take over; we think of the

Spirit as wind, fire, oil, water—impersonal images all—and refer to the Spirit as *it*. No wonder many regard the Spirit as a gray, oblong blur" (6). In fact, Fee argues, personhood applies to the Spirit as much as it does to the Father and to the Son. The Spirit is God's presence—God's empowering presence.

The next section on usage of terms deals with how Paul used the words *pneuma* (spirit), *pneumatikos* (usually translated "spiritual") and *charisma* (usually "spiritual gift"). Fee disagrees with some scholars who maintain that the presence or absence of the article with *pneuma* determines whether Paul meant the Holy Spirit or not. He presents his evidence in detail for those who know Greek and follows with a summary for those who do not. Fee concludes that Paul's usage of *pneuma* always meant the Holy Spirit when discussing the activity of God, even in many places where traditionally it has been interpreted or translated as the human spirit (2 Thess 2:13; 1 Cor 14:2; 2 Cor 6:6; Eph 2:8; 5:18; 6:18). He agrees that some instances are ambiguous, but still tends to believe that Paul had the Spirit in mind at some level. Similarly, Fee feels that the word 'spiritual' as a translation for *pneumatikos* is rather useless, because it has come to mean whatever the user wants it to mean. He suggests that we discard the word "spiritual" because of contemporary uses of the word ". . . where 'spiritual' tends to mean either 'religious,' 'nonmaterial' (a meaning absolutely foreign to Paul), something close to 'mystical,' or, even worse, 'the interior life of the believer'" (32). The

solution is to think of it in terms of one “walking in the sphere of the Spirit,” or “belonging to the Spirit.” “Spirit-people” is the term he seems to prefer. He concludes this section with a short discussion of the words *charisma* and *dynamis* (power).

The next part of the book compromises the bulk of the work. It consists of a verse by verse commentary on every passage which includes a direct, indirect or underlying reference to the Spirit. Fee includes the letters of disputed authorship, giving his reasons (some quite detailed and convincing) for inclusion into the Pauline corpus. It appears that the material is arranged chronologically (according to Fee’s determination). Thus, beginning with the Thessalonian correspondence, he continues with 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Romans, the four Prison Epistles and the three Pastoral Epistles. The Corinthian, Roman and Galatian epistles require the most discussion, of course, but Fee does not neglect a single verse that even hints at the Spirit. Focusing on specific texts and jumping through the epistles in this fashion could lose both context and continuity. But Fee does an excellent job of establishing the context before delving into the specific passages while remaining focused on the task at hand. The detailed analysis and extensive footnotes are probably more than most readers want or need. But for those who desire the depth and insight which Fee provides, it bestows an excellent feel for how Paul views the function and work of the Holy Spirit. (Much of the material in the 1 Corinthians section comes from Fee’s fine commentary on the epistle: NICNT, Eerdmans, 1987.)

The last section is the synthesis of all this detail and is divided into two parts. The first part consists of four chapters that attempt to systemize the theology of the Holy Spirit in the letters of Paul. The first chapter deals with the Spirit as the promise of eschatological fulfillment, his relation to Torah, the Spirit/flesh contrast and power as it relates to the Spirit. The next chapter discusses the Spirit as God’s personal presence in terms of personhood and the Godhead. The third chapter concerns salvation and the Spirit, his relation to the hearing of the Gospel, conversion, water and Spirit baptism and life in the Spirit. The final chapter discusses the Spirit in the believing community, Christian life, worship and *charismata*. The second part is entitled “Where to From Here? The Relevance of Pauline Pneumatology.” Fee states that his purpose is not to give “answers,” but to point out differences between Paul and ourselves on this matter and offer some suggestions as to how to bridge the gap. Fee says that this work is “. . . a plea for a recapturing of the Pauline perspective of Christian life as essentially the life of the Spirit,

dynamically experienced and eschatologically oriented—but *fully integrated into the life of the church.*” (901)

The book is wordy at times, and there is much repetition (Fee admits the inevitability of repetition in a study of this sort). Although the book may be daunting at first (over 900 pages), one could read the first and last sections only (under 200 pages) and use the commentary section for reference and detail where desired.

Fee’s book is important for anyone wishing to examine the role of the Spirit in Paul’s thinking. Coming from a Pentecostal tradition, Fee brings a perspective to this discussion that many scholars can not. Importantly, Fee constantly reminds his readers that Christ is at the center of Pauline theology—not the Spirit. But the Spirit lies closer to the center than evidenced in the majority of churches today. Fee states, “. . . our theologizing must stop paying mere lip service to the Spirit and recognize his crucial role in Pauline theology; and it means the church must risk freeing the Spirit from being boxed into the creed and getting him back into the experienced life of the believer and the believing community” (902). This is an exhortation many of us need to hear.

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Dallas Willard, **The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives**, including appendixes, bibliography and indices (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), reviewed by H. H. (Bo) Simeroth.

Seldom does a book come along that measurably impacts the broad spectrum of the Christian Community. Richard Foster notes Willard’s book as “the book of the decade,” and he may well be correct. The *kairos* of this book together with the heightened hunger in the ‘90’s for deeper spirituality may well make it the book which sets the stage for a much needed spiritual revival in the ‘90’s.

The subtitle to Willard’s book is **Understanding How God Changes Lives** (emphasis mine). If there ever was a subject within modern Christianity that needed clarity it is this one. As a new Christian in the Church of Christ in the mid ‘60’s I found no direction and very little teaching on this most important theological subject. The unspoken answer arising from the preaching and teaching of the time was that if we got our doctrines right and

behaved ourselves morally (no dancing, drinking, card playing, mixed swimming, etc.) that somehow we would be changed into a more godly person. Transformation, or spiritual growth, was centered on our resources—our intellectual understanding of the Bible and our moral action while God watched from the sidelines with interest. Over time it became obvious to me, as it has to many others, that spiritual growth and transformed lives cannot possibly rest solely upon our feeble selves. All the Bible knowledge we can gather and all the observances of right actions we can do cannot transform us into spiritual people. If our lives are going to be transformed then God must take an active role in it.

Dallas Willard has wrestled with the subject of spiritual growth (or spiritual formation) for some time. His teaching and writing have impacted many in Evangelical Christianity. Richard Foster credits Willard with being a strong influence on his thinking in *Celebration of Discipline*. In *The Spirit of the Disciplines* Willard not only lays an excellent theological foundation for the ancient practices but also provides a rich practical understanding of the relationship of body discipline to spiritual growth, of external works to internal faith and of life to grace. He outlines for us a general “strategy for living our day-to-day existence” in surrender to God.

Willard points out that through the ages devout people of all religions have known that the mind and body had to be rigorously disciplined in order to grow spiritually. How this was to be done was the subject of much debate. Willard’s methodology is simple—follow the practices of Jesus—prayer, fasting, times of solitude, simplicity of lifestyle, contemplation, charity, etc. He likens these things to the physical conditioning that an athlete goes through in order to perform excellently. It is training for spiritual excellence.

The key to understanding how Willard relates the practice of disciplines to spiritual growth is best described scripturally by Paul’s advice to the Romans.

... present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but let yourselves be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect (Romans 12:1-2, *NRSV*).

Paul presents spiritual transformation as a joint venture between the individual and God. We present our bodies as a living sacrifice to the “other reality,”

the realm of spirit, and no longer conform ourselves to the old socialized ego-personality formed by the structures of this world. We let ourselves be transformed (note Arndt and Gingrich translation of this perfect passive phrase, *A Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*, 513) by the renewing of our inner selves (*nous* in the Greek referring to the deeper structures of the mind). Thus, in our practice of these spiritual disciplines we are surrendering ourselves to God (our part in the venture), and in turn God, by his Holy Spirit, transforms us in our depths (God’s part). The value of the disciplines rests in helping us to be open to receive this grace. Through this grace our spiritual contact with God transforms us. No one can be in the company of God and not be radically changed. In this transforming process the old arguments polarizing faith and works, grace and law, collapse into this cooperative venture of love.

Willard does not speak much about the issue of the practice of spiritual disciplines falling into a rigid legalism. Having had the privilege of studying under Willard in graduate school, I recall asking him how one might know when his or her practice of spiritual disciplines had become legalistic. He replied that if you missed a particular occasion for your practice and felt guilty about it then you had slipped into legalistic practice. His teaching on the practice of spiritual disciplines categorizes them as voluntary surrender and not something one must do.

If one is interested in a biblically based, well written explanation of the history and purposes of the spiritual disciplines within Christianity then this book will not disappoint. If one is interested in the practices of the disciplines for the purpose of growing nearer to God, then there could be no better foundational book with which to begin.

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John William Beauden, *Paul’s Theology of Preaching, Jr.* NABPR Dissertation Series, Number 6, Mercer University Press, 1988. Reviewed by **Mark Love**.

This excellent book presents a thorough and insight-filled analysis of Paul’s view of preaching. Beauden’s work might best be described as exegetical theology (it reminded me of Leonard Goppelt’s *New Testament Theology*) which requires strenuous effort on the part of the author in examining both the individual trees and the theological forest. Beauden is up to the task.

Beaudean extracts Paul's thought on preaching through an examination of 1 Thessalonians 1:2-2:14, Galatians 1:16-17, 1 Corinthians 1:17-2:5, 9:14-18, 15:1-14, 2 Corinthians 4:1-6, and Romans 1:1-17. His handling of texts is solid and well informed. While one might anticipate the direction of discussion in well traveled texts like 2 Corinthians 4, Beaudean's treatment of texts like 1 Thessalonians provide nuance and depth to the student's understanding of Paul's sense of the preaching task.

Beaudean begins the book with a helpful historical sketch of the field of theology of preaching. After discussing the contributions of writers such as Barth, Heidigger, Ebeling, and Scherer, Beaudean suggests that his work fills a unique niche in that "none of these theologies emerges directly from the study of biblical texts" (21). Beaudean moves to Pauline texts hoping to answer the question "Why does the gospel require preaching?" or more precisely, "What is it about preaching that, for Paul, makes it indispensable to the gospel?" Beaudean concludes that preaching occupies a mediating place between the word of God and the gospel. According to Beaudean, "the word of God is God's creative power at work in the world, while the gospel is the word of God in a specific shape and form. Word of God is

broadly understood, a term tailored to the created universe . . . Gospel is understood more narrowly as the specific mode of the word in human history. Thus the creative word of God becomes the gospel in the mediating activity of preaching" (192). Preaching is a part of the work of this gospel event. Through preaching the herald enacts the will of the authoritative One who sent him. Such an event creates a community of those who have experienced the power of God. More than that, the preacher is shaped by the gospel event so that the message and messenger are in a common trajectory. This trajectory is given and maintained by the grace of God, allowing a sinner like Paul to participate in the proclamation of God's word.

This book recommends itself at several levels. First, it encourages preachers. The articulation of Paul's understanding of preaching and preachers will inspire and inform. Second, it constructs the theology in a manner congenial to restorationists — through the detailed study of texts. Finally, it invites restorationists into conversations in which we are less adept — those of systematic theology. Beaudean's readers will come away with greater insight into crucial texts, the mind of Paul, the task of preaching, and the God who creates through his word.

Notes from "Patternism"

These notes are from an article in the last issue of Leaven, "The Problem With Patternism," that were inadvertently omitted. We apologize to the author, Barry Sanford, and to our readers for the inconvenience.

¹In this case the spelling of both moods would be identical, so the spelling is indeterminate.

²"Those who deliberately neglect to learn must indeed expect to burn!" (Leslie Diestelkamp, "Learn or Burn," *The Gospel Guardian*, 13 (October 1966) 362-363.)

³**Historical Documents Advocating Christian Union**, (Joplin, MO: College Press, rpt. 1985) 109.

⁴The series eventually comprised 32 installments, from Volume II, Number 7 through Volume VII, Number 2.

⁵Mac Lynn, compiler, **Churches of Christ in the United States**, (Brentwood, TN: Morris & Phillips Associates, 1994) 93.

⁶McGarvey's **Fourfold Gospel** is a vivid example of this same methodology applied to the Gospels.

⁷**Early Christian Writings, The Apostolic Fathers**, translated by Maxwell Staniforth, (New York: Penguin Books, 1968) 230-231.

⁸*nomos* is anarthrous.

⁹James D. Bales, **The Hub of the Bible or Acts Two Analyzed**, (Rosemead, CA: Old Paths Book Club, 1960).