

The Impact of the Holy Spirit on Church Growth in the 21st Century

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Abstract

The progressive work of the Holy Spirit is observable right from the creation of the world as recorded in the Genesis account of creation (Genesis 1). Throughout the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit or Spirit of God permeates the noble activities of the great, noble and low classes of people in the society. Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, the prophets and prophetesses, were all influenced by the Holy Spirit. More so, all through the New Testament, the Holy Spirit had been an active factor or personality bringing to birth the recorded miracles, signs and wonders, as well as church growth in the early church. The ministry of Jesus Christ as well as its continuity through the apostles and the believers was through the Holy Spirit. This implies that the impact of the Holy Spirit on human existence cannot be overemphasized. However, the probing questions are: Who is the Holy Spirit? What impact has He made in the past? Is He still making impact on church growth today? The thrust of this paper therefore is to examine the impact of the Holy Spirit on church growth in the 21st century. The method adopted in this research was historical. The work discovered that the Holy Spirit did not only play important roles in the affairs of people as well as the church in the past but He is still impacting church growth today. The paper recommends that Christians should exhibit the fruits of the Holy Spirit in their lives for the good of the society and the growth of the Church. They should use the gifts of the Holy Spirit for the benefits of humanity, thus leading to church growth.

Key words: Impacts, Holy Spirit, Church, Church Growth.

Introduction

The Holy Spirit as the Third Godhead has been actively impacting the world right from creation. His hovering over the water was an act leading to incubation and bringing forth to visibility things that were not after God's declaration of "Let there be..." "Let..." (Genesis 1 and 2). His acts continue throughout all ages. All the recorded achievements in the epoch of Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, Solomon, the prophets, pre-Jesus' ministry, Jesus' ministry and post-Jesus' ministry through the early apostles and believers were through the help of the Holy Spirit. But has the Holy Spirit stopped His work? It is in line with this question that this paper examines the impact of the Holy Spirit on church growth in the 21st century.

Impact

The word ‘impact’, according to *Oxford Dictionary of English*, means “the powerful effect that something has on somebody or something.”¹ It has to do with a change that somebody or something causes in somebody or something else; a result. In this regard, this paper looks at the effects or change that the Holy Spirit brings on church growth.

Church

The term ‘church’ is not directly found in the Old Testament, but there are phrases or words in reference to church. Some of the words used in reference to church include temple, building, and sheep of God or flock of God. The English word ‘church’ has its derivative from the Greek “*Kuriakon*”, meaning belonging to the Lord. It also stands for the word *ekklesia* in Greek which denotes an assembly (as seen used in Acts 19:32) which also means congregation in the Old Testament. There are elements of imagery in some of the terms used in the New Testament in reference to the church. These include bride of Christ (1 Peter 2:9), Christ’s temple or body (Romans 12:5; 1 Corinthians 12:12-13), etc. Jegede and Abare note that the term ‘church’ “refers to the total presence of God’s people (Christianity) in a given location.”² Fatokun sees church as the community of believers – either all believers or a local group.³ This implies that the church could be any gathering of believers. It could also be an organized local body which is made up of all the believers in any given geographical location. More importantly, too, it could be the universal Church. This involves all believers in Jesus Christ all over the world.

In the Gospels, the term ‘church’ is used by Jesus only twice in Mathew 16:18 and 18:17. Geoffrey explains this to mean “that both these verses seem to envisage a situation that would follow Christ’s earthly ministry.”⁴ The verses also “show that Christ has this reconstruction in views that the church thus reconstructed will rest on the apostolic confession, and that it will take up the ministry of reconciliation.”⁵ Along this trend, most scholars conclude that the term ‘church’ implies an organic society established as the New Israel and endowed with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost for the purpose of impacting individual lives as well as the society in general.⁶

Church Growth

The term ‘growth’ is defined by *Oxford Dictionary of English* to mean the process of growing physically, mentally or emotionally. It also means an increase in the size, amount or degree of something. Growth also implies an increase in economic activity. Growth has to do with something that has grown.⁷ Therefore, growth is an internal and external increase in something. According to *bibletools*, “when God talks about growth, He means increasing in His attributes, the qualities that will conform to His image.”⁸

Church growth has to do with both internal and external activities and its increase in church expansion. According to Jegede and Isaac, “when church growth is mentioned, what often comes to the mind of the people is the increase in number of worshippers, which may also be translated into more monetary value. One can equally think of the size.”⁹ They also assert that church growth is a science. It “investigates the nature and function, planting and multiplication, as well as, health of Christian Churches as they seek specifically to effectively implement the Lord’s Great commission to make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:19-20).”¹⁰ Church growth

involves holistic evangelism or evangelistic activities leading to the conversion of people to the likeness of Christ, i.e. to become Christ-like.

The Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is the third Person of the Godhead (Matt. 28:19; 2Cor. 13:14). Both the Old and the New Testaments acknowledge the person of the Holy Spirit. There are numerous terms that describe the Holy Spirit in both Testaments, which may not be fully discussed in this paper. However, the terms which appear frequently include *ruach* and *pneuma* and they have various meanings.

The word '*ruach*' appears 378 times in the Old Testament Hebrew and it also appears 11 times in Amamic.¹¹ It has various meanings which include the following:

1. Wind: This refers to an invisible, mysterious, powerful force. The notion is that it has strength or it is violent in nature (Gen. 8:1, Ex. 13:19, 14:21, Num. 11:31, 1 Kgs 18:45, 19:11, Ez. 27:26, Jon. 1:4; 4).
2. Breath: This term implies air on a small scale. It also means spirit (Gen. 6:17, 7: 15, Ps 31: 5, 32:2, Ezk. 11: 5). The spirit is seen as the life and vitality of man and breasts. As noted by Duun, "it can be activated in a particular direction (Gen. 41:8, Nu. 5:14), can be impaired or diminished (Jos. 5:1, 1 Kings 10:5) and be revived again (Gen. 45:27, Jdg. 15:19, 1 Sa. 30:12)."¹²

In this wise, Robert Girdle Stone notes that just as "the blood represents the animal life so does wind the spiritual element in life."¹³ In fact, in Ezekiel's vision of dry bone (chapter 37), breath and wind (*ruah*) are remarkably identified in their function in relation to life-giving. The appearances of this kind of function are numerous in the O.T. and it makes the distinction between the physical and the supernatural breath difficult because both are God's gifts to man.

James D. G. Duun sees the spirit (*ruah*) as a divine power that gives special enablement to certain individuals, particularly the early charismatic leaders. He also agrees that "we may not presuppose an initial distinction in Hebraic thought between divine *ruah* and anthropological *ruah*; on the contrary, man can be identified with God's *ruah* (Gen. 6:6:2; 33:14f; Ps. 104:29)."¹⁴ *ruah* is a Hebrew word for spirit.

In the New Testament the term *pneuma*, which is a Greek word for spirit, appears 379 times and it has different meanings, depending on the context or usage. Sometimes, it refers to human spirit, angelic or demonic spirit and at times to divine spirit. Its reference to the dimension of the human personality appears 40 times (MK. 2:8; Acts 7:59, etc). But the most frequent in the NT is the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit¹⁵ (*pneuma hagion*),¹⁶ and it appears more than 250 times.

The probing question now is: should we refer to the Holy Spirit as a person or power or influence? Consciously or unconsciously, many think of it only as a power. In spite of the several arguments which one may raise over this, Jesus' words concerning the person of the Holy Spirit is weightier than other arguments. Jesus speaks of Him as a person, "He uses a masculine pronoun for Him, which can only be used in reference to a person, although grammatically it

ought to be a neuter pronoun because the word “spirit” (*pneuma*) in Greek is neuter.”¹⁷ Jesus said “He (the Holy Spirit) shall teach you all things” (Jn.14:16,17,26).

There are numerous references that reveal the Holy Spirit as a person. The references show that the Holy Spirit has a mind and the will of a person. He does what a person does. He spoke as well as gave instructions concerning the setting apart of Saul and Barnabas as missionaries (Acts 13:2). He reveals things to His people (Lk.2: 25-26; Acts 5:1-9). He decides which spiritual gifts He will give to each Christian (1 Pet. 4:10). As rightly noted by Donovan, “besides having a mind and will, the Holy Spirit has the emotion of a person, such as love (Rom. 15:3), joy (Rom.14:17), and grief (Eph. 4:30).”¹⁸ But has the Holy Spirit played any role or impact in the past?

The Impact of the Holy Spirit in the Past

The biblical account reveals that the Holy Spirit has been making impact or playing several roles in the past, both at creation and in human history. The Old Testament record shows the priority of the Spirit’s creative activity in the cosmos. “The Spirit of God was moving over the face of waters” (Gen 1:2 RSV). Here, the spirit is represented in a threefold function in relation to creation. Firstly, He is “The Spirit of God”. The author of Genesis juxtaposes the Spirit so as to show His personality and divinity. Secondly, “His infinite divine energy and power are indicated by His control over the chaotic element out of which the cosmos was being formed.”¹⁹ Thirdly, “the moving over” suggests the life-giving and formative function of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit was seen at work in the creation of the natural universe, man and the great redemptive plan. The Old Testament portrays the Holy Spirit as the revealer of the redemptive plan of God which is to be consummated in the future Messiah and Redeemer. He spoke through prophets and also inspired biblical authors to write. So, He is the inspirer and author of both the OT and the NT. Apostle Peter affirms this in his statement that, “No prophesy was ever made by an act of human will but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God” (II Peter 1: 21). This implies that the scripture is a product of *Theos pneuma* (Theos= God and pneuma=breath or spirit) i.e. God’s Spirit.

The New Testament presents before us an interesting and fascinating role played by the Holy Spirit prior to the birth and after the birth of Jesus Christ, the Redeemer.

He prepared the fore-runners of Christ; the prophets/prophetess who would introduce Christ in the synagogue (to the church embryo) and John the Baptist who would introduce Jesus Christ to the whole world (as the Lamb of God).

In fact, the Holy Spirit is seen throughout the Testaments as the executor of the redemptive plan. He identifies with Christ as the Third person of the Godhead and as the provider of power for the execution of the divine plan. He worked with Christ throughout the time of His earthly ministry. He healed and converted people, and waged war against spiritual forces or evil spirits. He assisted Christ through the cross and resurrection. All that Christ did and taught before and after his death and resurrection was done through the power of the Holy Spirit. The same Spirit was promised to be given to the apostles. The fulfillment of this is found in Acts 2 which led to the birth of the Church and to the spread of the gospel unto the outermost parts of the world. The

apostles were able to face challenges, perform miracles and healings and preach with greater effect through the Holy Spirit endowment and gifts (1Cor 12:13, Eph 4). Obviously, the continuity of the work of Christ by the apostles and believers is made possible through the Holy Spirit.

The vital role played by the Holy Spirit in human history cannot be overemphasized. One will agree with William Fitch that, "the silence of the Holy Spirit about himself is one of the Bible's great surprises."²⁰ One would have expected that the Holy Spirit who is the agent of the Godhead would be loud in his own claim but he does not.²¹ Why? The answer is found in Jesus' statement "He shall not speak of himself." "He shall glorify me" (John 16:14). Everything the Holy Spirit does is to bring glory to Christ. Thus, the Holy Spirit in His operation upon the hearts of sinners awakens them, convicts them of sin, leads them to repentance, enables them to believe in Jesus, and connects them with justification through regenerating them by His own divine energy. Having made them become children of God through the new birth, He witnesses to their adoption. He dwells with the justified believers, strengthening such ones in the Lord, helping them grow in grace, "showing them the remains of the carnal nature still existing and causing them earnestly to desire a clean heart."²² Such believers, having consecrated themselves to the Lord through the leading and help of the Holy Spirit, now receive the baptism of the Holy Ghost. This leads to purification of their hearts by faith. The Holy Spirit endues them with power, fills them and abides in them. Through indwelling in them, He operates in the hearts of the sanctified believers "as a teacher, guide, strengthener, comforter, expounder of the scriptures, and glorifier of Jesus."²³ He plays a multi-dimensional role in the glorification of Christ. The Holy Spirit gives the true spirit of prayer, and through the Holy Spirit, Christ exercises His headship and authority in the church. According to Clark, the Spirit leads and directs all true worship, and imparts his gift to individual members, male or female. By the exercise of this gift, God is glorified and the Church is edified.²⁴

The Holy Spirit through His numerous roles can be seen as harvester and preserver of harvest for the glorified Christ. He has done these in the past and He is still at work. If this is true, is He still performing the role and impacting today, that is, in the 21st century?

The Impact of the Holy Spirit Today

Our modern society is one in which the happenings raise many questions as to the work of the Holy Spirit. Although there are rapid developments, both in knowledge and technology, there is also escalation in vices. Wickedness, immoral acts and sins are at their peak. It is a time of the most perilous experiences in human history. However, it may be argued that it is a time for greater harvest too. One probing question which we may ask is; what does the Holy Spirit do among unbelievers today? Or is the Holy Spirit still at work?

The answer to the question is plain to Christians. The Holy Spirit restrains much evil in the world. In the words of O'Donovan, "if it were not for the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit in the world today, life in this world would be unbearable. We do not fully understand how evil in the heart people really are, and what they would do, given the opportunity."²⁵ It is through the restraining work of the Holy Spirit that many people do not do much of the evil they will like to do. The world would have become unbearable if the Holy Spirit were to stop His restraining work. The Holy Spirit does His work through different ways. He uses the government, the law and the police and other law enforcement agencies (Rom. 13:3-4). At times, He uses the holy

angels of God in response to the prayer of Christians Acts 12:3-8. He also speaks to people's hearts about right and wrong and convicts them of guilt for doing wrong things (John 16:8). He uses the human conscience. The Holy Spirit uses preachers, missionaries, etc., in bringing people and sinners to Christ (John 16:13). Numerous people are seen today at crusades and revival services giving their lives to Christ. Were it not for the work of the Holy Spirit, none of them would ever repent or put their faith in Christ.

The fact that people think of Christ and also consider what He has done for them is the work of the Holy Spirit (John 15:26). The Holy Spirit does not only rescue people from witchcraft, demon possession, criminal violence, sexual sin, drug addiction and some numerous other sins (especially in Africa), He also gives them a new life in Christ. Several miracles and healings are being performed today through the work of the Holy Spirit. In order that the work of changing sinful men and women into the holy image of Christ be realizable, the Holy Spirit does not leave the believer in the conversion stage. He does many things for the Christians and in the Christians. The list of some of the things which He does for Christians include:

1. Regeneration: The Holy Spirit gives spiritual birth and new life to those who believe and trust in Christ (Titus 3:5, John 3:3, 1 Cor. 12:13).
2. Sealing: Our membership in the family of God becomes possible through the seal of ownership placed upon us by the presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 1:21-22, Eph. 1:13-14).
3. Strength and encouragement: He strengthens and encourages Christians (John 14:16, Eph. 3:16). He is indeed a good helper and counselor. He gives both spiritual and moral strength to Christians (Eph. 3:16, 20), as well as physical strength and endurance for the work of the gospel.
4. Prayer: He helps Christians to pray and also prays for Christians or interprets their prayers to God the Father (Rom. 8:26-27, 1 Cor. 14:14).
5. Teaches: The Holy Spirit teaches, reminds and illuminates the meaning of God's truth to Christians (John 14:26, 16:13, 1 Cor. 2:10-12).
6. Interprets, witness and service: The Holy Spirit helps Christians to witness and work for Christ. He motivates them to serve the Lord (Acts 1:8, Col. 1:29, Phil. 2:13).
7. Fruits of the Spirit: Good virtues can only be produced through the help of the Holy Spirit in the Christian life. These virtues express themselves in the "fruits of the Spirit" (Gal. 5:22-23) and they include: Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Gentleness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Humility and Self-control. The Holy Spirit helps in producing these fruits of the Spirit.
8. Guidance: The Holy Spirit is a perfect guide. He guides the Christian in his daily life as well as in service to the Lord (Rom. 8:14, Acts 16:6-7).
9. Signs and miracles: He performs signs and miracles in confirmation of the gospel of truth (Acts 13:8-12). These have tremendously been adding more converts to the Church.
10. Anointing: The Holy Spirit anoints people so that they can preach and teach God's word effectively, thus edifying the Church (1 Cor. 12:28, 1 Cor. 14:4, 1 John 2:27).
11. Calling to ministry: He calls people and sets them apart for the ministry of the gospel (Acts 14:2). He also confirms the call through the testimony and encouragement of other spirit-filled brethren in the local church.

12. Spiritual gifts: He is a giver of gifts. He gives every Christian one or more spiritual gifts (1 Pet. 4:10-11). These God-given spiritual abilities help the Church in many ways (Rom. 12:4-6, 1Cor. 12:4-11) and lead to growth.
13. Overcoming temptation: He helps the Christian in resisting temptation as well as direct attack of Satan or enemies (Matt. 26:40-41, 1 John 4:4, 5-8, 2 Thess. 3:3).
14. Conscience activator: The Holy Spirit sharpens the conscience of each believer. The hearts of Christians are filled with the love of Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit. Through these He moves them into many works of mercy and help, such as helping the sick, poor, the blind, the handicapped and the hurting people of the world. Different Christian organizations are involved in this act of mercy and help today.
15. Christian unity²⁶: The coming together of different Christian organizations or denominations as one body, such as CAN, PFN, etc., is the work of the Holy Spirit. He creates unity and fellowship among Christians (Eph. 4:3-4). This is indeed needed in the 21st century, more than ever before, for the glorification of Christ, and this is what the Holy Spirit is doing.

Recommendations

The gifts of the Holy Spirit should be used for the benefit of humanity. God gives the gifts of the Holy Spirit to the Church so as to profit with them. Everyone should yield to the leading of the Holy Spirit as this will help in having a good society. Those given the gift of healing should pray for the sick for healing. The demon-possessed ones should be delivered and set free from the shackles of the tormentors by those gifted by the Holy Spirit to perform deliverance. People endowed with the gifts of prophecy and vision should reveal things to come, pray for the good of the society, instruct, encourage and bless people in the name of the Lord. People endowed with the gifts of administration should administer in the fear of God, knowing that they will give account to God the Giver of the gift who had put them in positions of power to administer over His people, mankind or nation. Christians should make themselves available for the use of the Holy Spirit so that the unreached could be reached with the gospel of salvation. Christians should make themselves available for the use of the Holy Spirit so that the unreached can be reached. Christians should exhibit the fruits of the Holy Spirit in their lives, such as love, humility, joy, peace, kindness, goodness, patience, gentleness, etc., so as to make the society loving and peaceful. Christian religious bodies, such as CAN, PFN, CPFN, etc., and church denominations should foster unity within the body of Christ and the society at large. This will in no small way reduce or curb the vices and menaces that are taking grip of our society.

Conclusion

The Holy Spirit has been playing some roles in the past, right from the creation of the cosmos. His work has not ceased. He is still at work in the Church in particular and in the world in general in order to bring the redemptive plan of God to fulfillment. This is what Christ came for, as well as to glorify God. An individual is expected to yield and cooperate with the Holy Spirit as His impact is so germane in the world. This will surely lead to better dividends for us in this world and in the world to come. The growth of the Church lies in the roles or impacts of the Holy Spirit, and these have been examined in this paper. The Church, which is the body of

Christ, the Bride, the Flock of God, etc., is expected to exemplify the gifts and fruits of the Spirit as she awaits the Bridegroom, knowing that she has some rewards to receive from the Bridegroom.

End Notes

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