Chapter Six

The Surprises of the Holy Spirit: 1

The Surprises of the Twentieth Century

*Purpose*: The purpose of this teaching is first to open the minds and hearts of the hearers to the scope of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in our day. Most will come with a much more limited view, so this teaching is for the expansion of their awareness. Many will never have heard of Messianic Jews. Their inclusion in this sequence introduces the theme of Israel and the Jewish people in a full context of biblical faith centred on Jesus Christ and separate from the contemporary problematic in the Middle East.

*Presentation*: With this teaching It is important to get the hearers thinking themselves and to relate it to their experience of widening horizons. So after the presentation of the four surprises, it is best to ask them what patterns they can see in this sequence, and then add any dimensions they may not have noticed. If this teaching is combined with the next one on the Surprises of the First Century, attention should be paid to the remarks on Presentation at the start of that chapter

The Importance of Surprises

It can be useful to preface this teaching with a comment on why God needs to surprise us and why such surprises are important for us and for the Church. The surprises lie not just in the fact that something miraculous or amazing occurs, but that God’s ways of acting do not correspond to ours. It is an illustration of the verse in Isaiah: “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts.” (Is. 55: 9). We are surprised by the Lord when the Lord acts in ways that demonstrate how much higher his thoughts are than ours. When we pray for God to move in some area, we should not expect the response to be God doing what we think God should be doing. It will go way beyond, and in our unbelief we are surprised!

In picking out these surprises, I am not saying that these are the only surprises of the Lord in this time period. But these surprises are picked out because they illustrate a pattern that tells us something important about the Lord’s priorities and purposes.

The Surprises of the Spirit in the Twentieth Century

*The First Surprise*: I am locating the first surprise in the **Pentecostal movement**. The outbreak of the Pentecostal movement was a surprise in several respects: most importantly, in what happened, but also in how it happened and where it happened. First, the outbreak of the Pentecostal movement was experienced as a new “Pentecost”, not just happening to a few individuals but to many gathered in one place. The place was surprising because it was a disused warehouse building in a poor area of Los Angeles leased by a black (African-American) man of 36 years old, who became its pastor. It was here that the fire of Pentecost was manifest, that worship meetings lasted for most of the day and night, that prophetic words and healings were happening, and that many spoke in other tongues. What became known as the Azusa Street revival drew people from far and wide, and from here many missionaries went forth to carry the news and message of Pentecost to all the continents of the world. The personal experience of Pentecost was called “baptism in the Holy Spirit”, for which seekers prayed and often “tarried”, following the example of the apostles in the Upper Room before Pentecost.

The events as Azusa Street were first a surprise to the Evangelical and Holiness churches of Los Angeles, and soon to those beyond LA and California. The older Protestant churches were barely aware that it was happening. Widespread opposition and even ridicule quickly developed. Only two months after the beginnings of the revival, the Los Angeles Ministerial Association demanded that the Azusa Street Mission be closed down, as it was disturbing the peace. Many denounced the Pentecostals as fanatics and labelled them “holy rollers”. When the Pentecostal movement arrived in Germany, the German Holiness association repudiated it, in effect taking the position that nothing good could come out of California, denouncing the Pentecostal movement as “nicht vom oben, sondern von unten” (not from above, but from below). Nonetheless the movement spread and had established a foothold on all five continents within two years of Azusa Street.

*The Second Surprise*: The second surprise is the appearance of Pentecostal blessing beyond the Pentecostal movement, and specifically **the charismatic movement in the Protestant churches**. Largely because the first generation of Pentecostals experienced rejection at the hands of the existing churches, they turned inwards and lost the sense of some pioneers that the Pentecostal movement was a force for unity in the Spirit. So as new Pentecostal denominations formed, the Pentecostals expected any Christians in the Churches who were filled with the Spirit and spoke in tongues to leave and join them. Their vision for continuing outpouring of the Holy Spirit became in effect simply a vision for the worldwide expansion of the Pentecostal movement.

It was into this new situation that the second surprise came. But it had been prepared for by a prophecy that surprised both the prophet and the one to whom the prophecy was given. In January 1936, a British evangelist, Smith Wigglesworth, was preaching in South Africa to an Afrikaans-speaking congregation with a young South African preacher, David du Plessis, serving as translator. One morning Smith Wigglesworth took du Plessis aside, and delivered a prophetic word. This was to the effect that the Lord was going to pour out His Spirit in a powerful revival that would impact the historic Churches. Ancient cathedrals would once again be filled with worshippers singing the praises of God. Du Plessis would be involved in this revival, but it would not begin until after Wigglesworth’s death. Wigglesworth died early in 1947. During the 1950s there were increasing reports of Christians who were not Pentecostals being baptized with the Holy Spirit. Du Plessis’s friend, Donald Gee, who edited the one Pentecostal magazine with an international circulation, described this new current as “Pentecost outside Pentecost”. But the Christian world only became aware of this development from 1960, when *Time* magazine had a report on how Episcopalian (Anglican) priest, Dennis Bennett, had publicly proclaimed that he had been baptized in the Spirit and spoke in tongues. But already the movement had been spreading particularly through the Full Gospel Business Men and through healing ministries that drew people from all backgrounds seeking healing. By 1963, there were reports in the USA of Anglicans, Lutherans, Presbyterians and Baptists being baptized in the Spirit and the movement reached Britain and Germany. Soon there were official denominations reports on this unexpected development, with most Protestant denominations giving a very lukewarm welcome, but refusing to condemn it, while their biggest reservations clearly concerned the apparent irrationality of speaking in tongues.

The charismatic movement as it began to be called from 1963 was a surprise first to the Pentecostals, who were surprised that charismatics mostly wanted to stay in their churches and that their churches did not throw them out. It was a surprise to the Protestant churches, as it did not fit into their rational ways of thinking and operating nor did it correspond to their major concerns.

*The Third Surprise*: The third surprise was the spread of **the charismatic movement to the Roman Catholic Church**. The charismatic movement broke out among Roman Catholics at a week-end near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in February, 1967. This was a huge surprise to everybody. It was a massive surprise to the Pentecostals, who were just coming to terms with the idea of Protestants being baptized in the Spirit. But Catholics – that was a step too far for many! It was a real surprise to the Protestant charismatics. They too did not expect revival within the Roman Catholic Church. After all, since the division of the Reformation, there had never been a movement of the Spirit in which Protestants and Catholics had both been involved. But it was also a surprise to the Catholic Church. Although the Catholic world had focused on issues of church renewal since Pope John had called the Second Vatican Council and although Pope John had composed a prayer for the Council than began “Renew, O Lord, your wonders in this our day as with a new Pentecost”, no Catholics were imagining that Church renewal would mean Catholics having a life-changing experience of receiving the Holy Spirit, or that they would prophesy and speak in tongues. So the fact that the Catholic Church welcomed the charismatic renewal, most notably by Pope Paul VI in 1975,much more quickly and clearly than any Protestant denomination was also a surprise. However, the Council had in fact prepared the way for the charismatic renewal: first, through its teaching on the charisms in *Lumen Gentium*, para. 12[[1]](#footnote-1) and through its acknowledgment for the first time in the Decree on Ecumenism that the Holy Spirit is also at work in Christian communities outside the communion of the Catholic Church[[2]](#footnote-2). Without this opening to ecumenism, it is unimaginable that the Catholic Church could have welcomed a movement that began “outside”.

*The Fourth Surprise*: The fourth surprise is the rise of **the Messianic Jewish movement**. The charismatic movement in the Catholic Church broke out in February 1967. The Messianic Jewish movement followed quickly with the origins of a dynamic movement of Jews coming to faith in Jesus (or Yeshua as they say) being dated from June 1967, the time of the Six-Day War in Israel. Jews coming to faith in Jesus and committed to living as Jewish disciples of their Messiah was not new in 1967. But that is when the modern movement began. It is when large numbers of young Jews, many through the Jesus movement in California, were converted and experienced the power and gifts of the Holy Spirit. So, although not all Messianic Jews are charismatic, the movement dynamism was strongly charismatic, a fact that can be seen from the great creativity of Messianic Jews in song and dance.

The rise of the Messianic Jewish movement was a surprise to all who encountered it. Although many Evangelical Protestants had prayed for years for the conversion of the Jews, and they had supported mission societies founded for this purpose, they were not expecting converted Jews to insist that they were still Jews who wanted to live a distinctively Messianic Jewish lifestyle. Just as Pentecostals expected other Christians baptized in the Spirit to join them, so Evangelicals expected converted Jews to become good Evangelicals.

Reflection

As we reflect on this series of surprises, we can see a pattern. First of all, in each case there is the same outpouring of the Holy Spirit, producing the same kind of spiritual effects and the same gifts and capacities whoever the participants and whatever their background or church belonging. Second, with each succeeding surprise, the Holy Spirit is poured out upon people whom the earlier participants regarded as outside the sphere of the Spirit’s operation. It could only happen to “them” if they leave their present church affiliation and join us. In other words, the basic surprise element is the same in each case. Third, with the series there is a kind of moving back through history: the Pentecostals (new in the 20th century), the Protestants (from the 16th century), the Catholics (from the 1st century) and the Jews (with whom it all began).

Important Questions

*The Orthodox Church*. After this teaching, people sometimes ask, “What about the Orthodox Church?”. Here two things can be said quite simply. First, that this renewal did break out in the Orthodox Church in the USA at the same time as it began among the Catholics. For a time it was called “Spiritual Renewal” and they had their own service group and magazine. But it was severely disapproved of by the Orthodox bishops and the movement was effectively squashed. Second, the Orthodox Church has always emphasized the Holy Spirit more than the Western Church (one reason why it was so difficult for them to receive this very Western movement) and have always given place for charisms in their church life. In fact, there are various renewal currents in the Orthodox world – for example, the modern monastic revival in Egypt with a clear charismatic dimension, the Lord’s Army in Romania with a strong evangelistic witness and lay participation. So we Western Christians should not conclude that there is no renewal in the Orthodox Church, but recognize that it is happening in a different way.

*The New Charismatic Churches*. I have been asked how the new charismatic churches that have arisen in the last thirty-five years and that are distinct from the Pentecostals fit into this pattern. In many ways, they can be seen as a further variation on the Pentecostal model of new Spirit-filled groupings that arise outside the historic Christian structures. Saying this does not mean that they are no different from the Pentecostals and do not have their own significance, but it means that they do not affect this pattern of the Holy Spirit working back through history.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Questions for Discussion

1. What strikes you as most significant in this sequence of surprises?
2. Have you ever experienced this kind of surprise that God works in ways we could never have imagined?

1. “Allotting his gifts according as he wills (cf. 1. Cor. 12: 11), he also distributes special graces among the faithful of every rank. By these gifts he makes them fit and ready to undertake various tasks and offices for the renewal and upbuilding of the Church, as it is written, ‘The manifestation of the Spirit is given to everyone for profit.’ (1 Cor. 12: 7). Whether these charisms be very remarkable or more simple and widely diffused, they are to be received with thanksgiving and consolation since they are fitting and useful for the needs of the Church. Extraordinary gifts are not to be rashly desired, nor is it from them that the fruits of apostolic labours are to be presumptuously expected. Those who have charge over the Church should judge the genuineness and proper use of these gifts, through their office not indeed to extinguish the Spirit, but to test all things and hold fast to what is good. (cf. 1 Thess.5: 12, 19 – 21).” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “..the separated Churches and communities … though we believe they suffer from the defects already mentioned, have been by no means deprived of significance and importance in the mystery of salvation. For the Spirit of Christ has not refrained from using them as means of salvation” (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, para. 3). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I have reflected in several writings on the significance oft he new charismatic churches and networks, most notably in my book, *The Challenges of the Pentecostal, Charismatic and Messianic Jewish Movements* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)