

The Holy Spirit and the Congregation

Hans W. Maris

I Biblical foundations

Introduction: Shepherds in the church of Christ

Speaking of the congregation of Christ we do not know or mean any other. It is about the church of Christ which is God's dwelling place. It is in Christ 'that the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in Him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.' Such is Paul's instruction to the Ephesians (Eph. 2,21-22). A clearer description of the Trinitarian character of the church can hardly be found. This implies that the work of the Holy Spirit in the church cannot be described apart from Christ or apart from God the Father. When we deal with the subject of piety this continually has to be kept in mind. Especially when we have to focus on a number of influences that in our days creep into the church from a distinctive pneumatological point of view, this is most important. I have no doubt that in saying this I am not contradicting the two lectures that you received already in this conference. How important is the practical spiritual meaning of the confession of a Trinitarian God! This is not just reformed; it is biblical.

If we say church, and at the same time imply the piety or the spirituality of the congregation, we certainly must think of the officers in the church. Ministers and elders have this great responsibility to 'keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.' This is what Paul says to the elders of Ephesus, and he continues: 'Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.' (Acts 20,28). He then goes on to explain most specifically what kind of dangers will threaten the life of the church. We recognize the way he does the same thing in his letters.

What I mean with these remarks is that as servants of the church God gave us a specific responsibility to be aware of the dangers that threaten the congregation of our day. In this lecture I intend to indicate a few of these dangers, but not without making clear how the task of a shepherd in the congregation most of all is a positive one. I remember with thankfulness the mature and biblical guidance in this respect by the former professor in the Free Church College in Edinburgh – and former shepherd in the Highlands - Douglas MacMillan, in his lectures on Psalm 23 in *The Lord Our Shepherd*.¹ One of his beautiful remarks is: 'What is preaching? I don't know, but I think it rests in what a man is before it rests in what a man says.'²

The work of the Holy Spirit in the congregation

How important it is to realize that the Holy Spirit is not something, but *someone*. Often it seems that a sort of competition exists between Christ and the Spirit. Of course Christ as Head of the Church, his body, is most important for individual Christians as well as for the church as a whole. But easily the suggestion is there, that, when we concentrate on Christ, we may be in danger of forgetting the Spirit of God. Isn't He the One from whom we may expect the experiential 'more' that is so needed in the church? Often the Holy Spirit is presented as the source of supernatural power and experiences: 'God's empowering presence'.³ Not seldom this aspect in

1 J. Douglas MacMillan, *The Lord our Shepherd*, Bryntirion: Evangelical Press of Wales (1983), repr. 1992; translation in Dutch J. Douglas MacMillan, *Mij zal niets ontbreken. Een bijbelstudie over Psalm 23*, Heerenveen: Groen 1998.

2 MacMillan, *The Lord our Shepherd*, 86.

3 Cf. the title of Gordon Fee's book on the Holy Spirit. Fee certainly is an able New Testament scholar, but at the same time a Pentecostal preacher. His book testifies of both of these characteristics. Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence. The Holy Spirit in the letters of Paul*, Peabody: Hendrickson 1994. Fee strongly pays attention to the 'language of power', see e.g. pp. 35f. See on this aspect also Samuel Yull Lee, *Grace and Power in Pentecostal and Charismatic Theology*, Apeldoorn: TUA 2002.

a charismatic orientation in reading the Bible has led to a bifurcation of the Christ of grace and the Spirit of power.⁴

If we clearly see what the work of the Holy Spirit means for the church it has to be said that His work is not primarily about what He gives, but about who He Himself is for people: the Triune God who commits Himself in a bond of love to people. It is most essential in the Christian faith that between God and us not our way to God, but God's way to us is decisive. By nature we are dead in our transgressions and sins; we are objects of wrath (Eph. 2,1-3). That implies the fruitlessness of our search for God. Let it beforehand be said that God's work in men does not turn us off, but rather turns us on. We certainly are called to seek the things above (Col. 3,1), and follow the way of Christ Jesus (Col. 2,6-7), and to live by the Spirit (Gal. 5,16). Jesus spoke about remaining in Him and in his Word (John 15,5-8; 8, 31), but at the same time Jesus most emphatically promised the Spirit, the Comforter, who would come to teach us and to remind us of everything Christ has said to them (John 14,26; 15,26; 16,13-15; cf. 1Cor. 2,12-16). So our instruction about what we have to do and what is granted to us, are things that are very closely connected to each other.

In order to get a proper view of the work of the Spirit of God we must remember how it all began between God and man. Already in the Old Testament we encounter the Spirit, the Breath of God, as the very condition of life for all creation (Ps 104,30; Job 33,4). In the New Testament the Lord Jesus speaks of the Spirit who gives life (John 6,63; cf. Rom 8,2). Such expressions apparently characterize the Spirit of God, in creation as well as in recreation and redemption. True life is from the Spirit of Christ.

This reality of renewal and new life is never without the dark background of sin. It is about people that have become disobedient. And even the specially chosen people of God, Israel, appears to have broken away from God time and again. Yet, miraculously, God did not bring his story with man to an end. It certainly would be edifying to go into the details of this divine history, and follow the language of the covenant of God, of the renewal of hearts in the new covenant (Jer. 31, Ez. 36 & 37). We find the message of an intimate relationship between God and man, because of the renewing work of the Holy Spirit of God.⁵

In 1 Corinthians 2 we find that this intimate relation between God and man explicitly is a *mutual* one. We read: 'The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God.' And then it says 'For who among men knows the thoughts of God except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no-one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.' And then the link is made between God and us: 'We have not received th spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us.' (1 Cor. 2,10-12). So a reciprocity is given between God and man on the level of the Holy Spirit. We may have a look into the heart of God, and know his affectionate love for us. An intimate relation indeed.

At the background of this wonderful relationship between God and man is the fact that man was made in the image of God (Gen. 1,26-27). Even the life of man as male and female as being complete only in this togetherness, is a reminder of the fullness of life that God has in Himself. Man indeed was meant to live in communion with God. God wanted man to mirror his own fullness. And God wanted to have a creature that would respond to Him, and that thus would be responsible. I need not explain that every day in this world shows in manifold ways how this high descent of man is perverted by sin. Even in our own hearts, also of born again people we bear proof of this perversion. We are reformed enough to agree with such expressions in which the reality of the Fall is confessed.

4 This statement was made by Samuel Lee, o.c. in one of the propositions (nr. 4) belonging to this dissertation.

5 In a broader article I developed this whole theme, 'De drie-enige God in gemeenschap met ons' ('The Triune God in communion wit us') in H. ten Brinke, J.W. Maris e.a., *Geestrijkleven*, Barneveld: De Vuurbaak 2006, 14-27.

I elaborated on this all because we often forget in our time that between God and man it is the *relation* that is essential. The Triune God creates a relation of love with sinful people, that He chose to be redeemed to be eternally His people! How could we speak about the church of God, the body of Christ, the temple of the holy Spirit apart from this divine intimacy! The essence, indeed, is the *relation*. The Holy Spirit is the High Pontifex, the Builder of this holy bridge between God and man.

Relation and experience

In our age of course there are several spiritual dangers that are a threat to the church. I don't want to give a complete catalogue. What I know, however, is that in the field of spiritual experience a chief temptation is creeping into the church. Of course there is no faith without experience. Of course the Bible has quite a number of expressions that reveal emotions, sorrows, pain, joy, happiness. Perhaps we might say that the ultimate expression of the Christian experience always can be reduced to the notion of love. We know in human relations how most of all a relation of love releases quite a series of emotions and experiences. Unspeakable joy, ultimate expectations, but also deep misery if the relation has grown dark because of guilt or because of afflictions and temptations. This all is applicable in an even stronger mode when the relation with God is at stake.

At the same time, however, the experience of our relation with God is not just an enlargement of what we may experience in human relations. The most specific characteristic of our relation to God is to be found in the idea of faith. Even in the triplet *faith, hope and love* (see 1 Cor. 13,13) it is faith that precedes love. Yes, the heart of the relation between God and man - as seen from our side – lies in faith. Moreover we have to be aware of the fact that faith implies man in his total existence, in which also his responsibility is contained. Because, when dealing with the question of being saved or not, all is decided in this one thing: if we have faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. 'Whoever believes in Him, is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only son.' (John 3,18)

When we ask what is meant by living *through the Spirit*, then exactly the same content must be presented as by living *through faith*. It is the Spirit who gives faith. Faith is a gift of God (Eph. 2,8). It is the Spirit who makes man to have life in Christ. The Spirit indeed is the Spirit of life (Rom. 8,2). At the same time the Spirit is characterized by grace: the Spirit of grace (Heb. 10,29) and the Spirit of sonship (Rom. 8,15). All the gifts that may be expected from the Spirit of God – life, wisdom, truth, love, communion with God – are only following after faith. Faith indeed is the nucleus of life with God.

I hardly need to stress that all I say about faith also implies a central place for the Lord Jesus Christ. Knowing Him is the guarantee and at the same time the fullness of salvation. *Spiritual life is recognized, not in something man can attain or experience, but in knowing Jesus Christ personally.*

To believe means having a *relationship*. That certainly involves experience. Nevertheless I must add, that not all kinds of religious experience imply faith in Jesus Christ.

Exactly here we have an entrance to the necessity of discernment that is seriously needed in the church of our time. Many ways of emotional, religious, charismatic or other influences of a revival-kind promise higher experiences, gladness, power, health, even success and wealth without being rooted in faith and in a relationship with Christ by grace. I would suggest the reading Tim Keller's book on the gospel of Mark, *King's Cross – The Story of the World in the Life of Jesus*⁶, in which he time and again – listening to the very text of the Scriptures - explains what difference exists between being religious and having faith.

One remark related to this essential character of faith for the experience of a Christian is, that a two-stage experience in Christian life to my conviction is an impossible thing. There is nothing higher, or more essential

⁶ Timothy Keller, *King's Cross – The Story of the World in the Life of Jesus*, New York: Dutton, Penguin Group 2011; Dutch translation: Tim Keller, *Kruistocht – het leven van koning Jezus*, Franeker: Van Wijnen 2011.

than having a relation to God in Christ in faith. I discover that I cannot elaborate on that now. I just realize with these remarks that I impossibly cannot possibly follow our late and beloved Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones in his posthumous publications *Joy Unspeakable* and *Prove all things*.⁷

II Recognizing unbiblical influences today

Categories?

How profitable it might seem to show from the history of the church how in all ages the catholic church has been accompanied by movements from within and influences from without, it is not possible to fit that in in this lecture. So I don't speak of Montanism, of Gnosticism and Mysticism of many kinds, of Joachim of Fiore in the Middle Ages, of enthusiast groups of Anabaptists and spiritualists in the Age of the Reformation. We pass over John Wesley in the 18th Century, and the Holiness Movement in the 19th century. When in those lines of spiritual streams we enter the 21st Century, it approaches spiritual influences which we encounter in our time from the side of Pentecostalism and the Charismatic Movements. An interesting thing is the different use of the word 'evangelical' in different languages. In English it mostly indicates any Bible-believing current or church. In the German language we must distinguish between 'Evangelisch' - which more or less means the same as Protestant or even Reformed⁸ – and 'Evangelikal' which more specifically indicates churches and movements from outside the main stream of Protestantism. It can be about Pentecostal, Baptist, Methodist or Brethren communities, that often do not want to be recognized by some confession, but rather by a spiritual tradition, and often have a strong leadership in the hands of one, or a few, that are strongly influential in the personal lives of their members.

In the Dutch language it is interesting that the word 'evangelisch' also more or less indicates the same as the German 'evangelikal'. Moreover quite a few congregations that used to call themselves Pentecostal or Full Gospel Congregations, now prefer the more moderate term 'evangelisch', although this does not mean that their convictions have changed. So we definitely have to be careful with labels, and it is even more necessary to look rather closely at what is going on around us or even in our midst. I prefer to deal with only a few phenomena that need to be seen in the light of the Scriptures. Some of the principles I indicated already can be helpful to distinguish and judge the influences we encounter. My hope and my intention is, that by looking more closely into only a small part of the range of spiritualities we meet, we may be helped to develop an ability to distinguish other religious phenomena also.

Songs and music

There is a sort of Christian songs and hymns from the spirituality of revivalism and praise that perhaps might cause discussion from the musical point of view. My idea is that different cultures can produce different styles of music that may be used to the honour of the Lord, although I fear that there are types of music that should not be attempted to be Christianized. But apart from such aspects in the texts of many such songs there is an approach of man from the angle of experience, touching our feelings, our happiness. There is praise music in which you recognize the word "I" as the main issue. And this is influential, and such not only in the younger generation. Of course in the Word of God, and certainly in the Book of Psalms, there is much praise. And how becoming that is! Characteristic there is the word "because", indicating that the reason of singing and praising is in the Lord. We praise the Lord for all He has given and done. 'It is good to praise the Lord, (...) for you make me glad by your deeds, O Lord; I sing for joy at the work of your hands. How great are your works O Lord, how

⁷ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Joy Unspeakable. The Baptism with the Holy Spirit*, Eastbourne: Kingsway 1984, and idem, *Prove all things. The sovereign Work of the Holy Spirit*, Eastbourne: Kingsway 1985.

⁸ So Die Evangelische Kirche Deutschlands (EKD), to a certain extent can be compared with the Protestant Church in the Netherland PKN), and consists partly of Lutherans and partly of Reformed members.

profound your thoughts.'(Ps 92,1-5) There it is not about us, and about what we feel, and how we rejoice in our own act of praising and endlessly repeating that word praise... There it is about the Lord. Not our praise gives us joy, but He does, and therefore it is good to praise his name! That is just an instance of how not our own religious experience is central, but rather our wonderful relation with the Lord. In faith the focus is on Him, on His grace, on His redemption. How meaningful it will be that our spiritual life is God-centred and Christ-centred, and not man-centred!

Ministry-prayer

A considerable influence in our reformed churches in the Netherlands is exercised by the practice of the so-called ministry-prayer. The ideas behind it are developed by the English female teacher and writer Leanne Payne, who in 1981 founded the PCM – Pastoral Care Ministries. Motive behind her work is to pass God's Healing Presence to others. In the Netherlands her thoughts are followed by the New Wine movement, that is settled in a church of reformed confession in Houten (NGK), and that has been very active in organizing Ministry Prayer courses. The influence is considerable, even leading groups of faithful members in congregations to leave their church and seek membership elsewhere. Leanne Payne's books *Listening Prayer*, and *The Healing Presence* continue to play a role in this ministry.⁹

Organizing the method of ministry-prayer is developed according to very detailed instructions. It is important to stick closely to the model. Very specific is the fact that 'listening to God' circles around the themes of prophecy, speaking in tongues, forgiveness and healing. The theme 'Listening to God' in this method is not connected at all with the Word of God as we have that in the Holy Scriptures. The same applies to the 'practices' or 'exercises' in listening to God. In the guidelines and instructions of 'New Wine' the Bible is mentioned as the 'ultimate standard'¹⁰. The word 'ultimate' demonstrates how the Scriptures are put at a distance of what really is going on.

The 'passing on' of thoughts, words and Bible texts that occur in the minds of the team members during the ministry-prayer reduces all kinds of impulses from the heart of a human being - the old nature, the thinking of the flesh included – to the denominator of listening to God. The history of the Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements has produced too many examples of thoughts and impulses, presented as prophecies from the Holy Spirit, than that we could neglect how these e.g. served to explain away a mistake or even clear sinful behaviour.¹¹ Many prophecies are placed on record in which the year and the moment of the second coming of Christ were predicted, and they all have proved to be false prophecies. This history should make us suspicious of this method of 'passing on' thoughts and messages. Yet in a very naïve way the ministry-prayer leads children of God on ways that do not bring them to faith and obedience to the Bible.

One of the aims of the ministry-prayer is 'bringing someone in the presence of God'. Here also we find a devaluation of the Word, and of the Lord's promise that where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them' (Mat. 18,20; cf. John 17,20). Apparently it was not necessary that the Lord Jesus would refer to some direct speech of the Spirit when he said this. Not only the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura*, but also the confession of *sola fide* is violated in such practices.

It must not be neglected that the main element and the main purpose of the ministry-prayer is not prayer. In the New Wine explanations valuable remarks are made about prayer. What is said about the prayer offered in faith, however, is not applicable to the ministry-prayer, because the essence of this prayer is not prayer but

9 Leanne Payne, *The Healing Presence – Curing the Soul through Union with Christ* (1989)> Transl. In Dutch Gods tegenwoordigheidsgeneest (Kampen: Kok 1997). Important for the ministry-prayer: *Listening Prayer – Learning to hear God's Voice and keep a Prayer Journal* (1994). Tranl. Luisterend bidden (Kampen: Kok 1998).

10 Dutch 'uiteindelijke maatstaf'.

11 In my dissertation *Geloofenervaring. Van Wesley tot de pinksterbeweging (Faith and experience. From Wesley to the Pentecostal Movement)*, Leiden: Groen 1992, I gave a number of examples of such prophesying. See e.g. p 183-189.

prophecy. It is about receiving direct ‘messages’ from the Holy Spirit. I quote: ‘Ministry is the prayer model of the empty hands. God must do it. He is the One who can touch the heart of the other person and renew his or her life.’ Any Christian could agree with this statement if it would be about the prayer of faith. It then would refer to the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration and sanctification. We are led astray, however, if this faith is applied to the invention of the ministry-prayer.

In the guidelines for the ministry-prayer there certainly is the warning to be careful. Things that are passed on to someone with whom the two members of the prayer team pray are offered in a moderate way as ‘a thought’. The formula that is recommended after praying with the laying on of hands is: ‘I was led to think of...’ or some expression like that. The possibility exists that thoughts that are passed on, are not at all from the Holy Spirit, but may be pious words from the mind of man, or even as thoughts from the old nature, and therefore sinful. In the guidelines these possibilities are realized. How then to think of the passing on of the following sentence: ‘I had to think compellingly of a marguerite.’ The reaction of the lady with whom this team prayed was: ‘Oh, that is my favourite flower!’ Of course this was very striking, and she kept the memory of a very beautiful experience, but don’t we agree that hearing such examples we need to run to biblical warnings like Proverbs 30,5-6 (‘Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. Do not add to his words, or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar.’ Or the word of Paul in 1 Corinthians 4,6 ‘...that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying, “Do not go beyond what is written”’)

The result is precisely the thing we are warned about in this connection: being inflated, taking pride in one man over against the other. The idea of being puffed up is also used in the letter to the Colossians, 2,18-19. Paul speaks of a person, going into detail about what he has seen – and that was about false humility and the worship of angels – and Paul goes on to say ‘and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions.’ And: ‘He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body...grows as God causes it to grow.’ The interesting thing is that when someone is convinced to have received some extra spiritual quality, the Holy Spirit, in this word of Scripture, qualifies that as being puffed up by an unspiritual mind.

This is serious enough to take such warnings to heart. Being puffed up is so miserable. It means being filled with nothing but air. If someone would prick it, nothing is left but a miserable feeling of guilt.

It certainly is remarkable and at the same time deeply alarming, that, in the instructions for the ministry-prayer listening to God is not at all connected to the power of the living Word in the Holy Scriptures. It is about listening to God without mentioning the Word. And so it is the old ideal of an unspiritual climbing up the ladder of experience without listening to what the Lord says in His holy Word.

Backgrounds

In the background of Leanne Payne’s thinking there is something that we need to be aware of. In her book *Listening Prayer* she makes use of the technique of “visualizing”. If we, in a prayer meeting, seek to understand the will of God, she commends: ‘We start by simply imagining with the eye of the heart what we have asked from God.’¹² She continues: ‘Then God will react to our imagining thinking, correct it or expand it. To see with the eyes of the heart the will of God being executed contains the same principle as what Isaiah says: ‘Where there is no revelation, the people cast off restraint’. We notice that not only this is not a word from Isaiah, but from Proverbs 29,18, but also this certainly has no connection with a method of visualizing prayer. Leanne Payne makes clear how this works: ‘As in every situation in prayer also we must have a picture of what is good and of the aim we have, otherwise we do not express the faith needed to attain what we pray. This is the creative principle.’¹³

12 In the Dutch translation, *Luisterend bidden*, 105 ‘We beginnen met het eenvoudig voorstellen met het oog van het hart wat we aan God hebben gevraagd.’

13 ‘Translated from the Dutch, o.c., 105.

With this method she is related to American charismatic authors like Morton Kelsey, Agnes and John Stanford, who took such thinking from the ideas of the antichristian, occult psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung.¹⁴ The same ideas about visualizing can be found in the teaching of the Korean Pentecostal preacher Paul Yonggi Cho. With him the background apparently lies in his former Buddhist practices.

This visualizing Leanne Payne advocates is nothing more than an occult technique. Nowhere in the Word of God we are taught to imagine the things we pray for, because then prayer would be more effective. The prayer 'Thy will be done' points in an entirely different direction!

That this New Wine movement, and the British and elsewhere operating branches of this influence, are so successful even in reformed circles, is astonishing. And that so many in Bible-believing churches miss the discernment that would make them stay far away from these practices, is alarming and distressing.

The rich heritage of prayer, given and explained to us in the Word of God, should cause us not to let ourselves being seduced and led astray from our sincere and pure devotion to Christ (2 Cor. 11,3). Just like the situation in the time of the New Testament it is not imaginary that unbiblical teaching might bring us to a Jesus other than preached to us, or to a different spirit from the one we received, or to a different gospel from the one we accepted. (2 Cor. 11,4).

Let us be faithful to the Word of God, and faithful to the body of Christ, the congregation, watching as shepherds of the church of God, which Christ bought with his own blood (Acts 20,28). How needy is a sound sense of discernment to all of us.

-O-O-

Leading question:

What kind of spiritual 'defensive strategy' could we develop in order to remain faithful to the Word of God and at the same time strengthen our congregations in a living reformed faith?

¹⁴ In my brochure *Scheppingenverlossing – het kader van eenbijbelspiritualiteit* (*Creation and redemption – the framework of a biblical spirituality*), Apeldoorn: TUA 1994, 21-25, I dealt with these influences more broadly.