

GROWING DAILY IN THE HOLY SPIRIT

Introduction

Daily prayer for the Holy Spirit is a common feature of all Christian traditions.

‘Come’ is the key word in the majority of hymns that have the Holy Spirit as their subject. A *daily* inviting or invoking of the Spirit lies behind the Prayer Book’s careful and emphatic wording that Confirmation candidates should –

daily increase in ...[God’s] Holy Spirit more and more ...

Daily praying of this sort raises a number of questions:

- Why invite the Spirit if he is already present?
- Why invite him more than once?
- What really do ‘come’ and ‘fill’ mean?

Such questions I will deal with later. First we need to consider what we mean by ‘growing’.

More Christian ?

Christian growth is not about becoming *more* Christian. Mother Teresa, St. Francis, John Wesley are not ‘more Christian’ than you or I. The word ‘Christian’ cannot be used in that way.

Let me explain. A member of the Queen’s family is called a ‘Royal’; a member of Christ’s Family is called a ‘Christian’. Just as royalty cannot become ‘more royal’ if they are good or ‘less royal’ if they are bad, so, in the same way, Christians cannot become ‘more Christian’ by being good or ‘less Christian’ by being bad.

We may travel abroad with a passport that describes us as ‘British’ – that is our *status*. Whether we are rich, poor, regal, criminal, fit, sick, young, old, handicapped or coloured, our status and membership of the Kingdom does not change. So too with our status ‘in Christ’ as *Christians*. John Wesley or St. Francis are not ‘more Christian’ than I am. ‘Better Christians’ YES! ‘More Christian’ NO!!

I share with them the same adopted status as a son, and heir [Romans 8:17].

Don’t read on until you have grasped this!

No Teacher’s Pet

If we fail to realise that Christian growth is not about becoming ‘more Christian’, then all our thinking about Christian growth will be confused. This is not just playing with words. If growth was about becoming ‘more Christian’, then we would think that our *successes* drew us closer to God and our *failures* removed us from him. Were Christian growth about becoming

‘more Christian’, we fall into the ‘Teacher’s Pet’ error: that is to say, the mistaken belief that God only really loves the successful Christians and merely tolerates us ordinary average folk!

When I was about thirteen I once replied to a question about my faith with the words ‘I try to be a Christian!’ A helpful teacher rounded on me and said ‘You do no such thing! You *are* a Christian – what you mean is that you’re trying to be a good one!’

Our ‘Christian’ status is something given us by God undeserved (‘grace’);
It is not a reward for goodness
It cannot be earned.

Our refusal to grow-up spiritually does not distance God from us, nor do our spiritual successes draw him closer.

His love for us does not (and cannot) increase if we are excellent and it does not decrease if we are rotten!

Sons* and Sainthood

We have two very different things here - one static, one moving.

- Our ‘Christian’ or ‘royal’ status ‘in Christ’ is ours by grace and **does not change** (unless, like a satanist, we renounce him).
- Our call to grow-up and mature [Ephesians 4:15, Colossians 1:28, etc.] requires **continual change**.

There are these two realities – our **status** and our **growth**. Christians tend to emphasise one at the expense of the other.

If *status* is over-emphasised and the call to grow-up is ignored, Christians tend to loll-about like spoiled children, enjoying their Christian status, allowing no demands to be made of them; making no attempt to enlarge their vision or to increase their effectiveness. The local church becomes a spiritual kindergarten, treading the same path decade after decade, getting increasingly ineffective and arrogant. Instead of ‘pressing onward’ as St. Paul urged, it spends all its time ‘pressing backward’ – and joins national societies that are travelling in the same direction!

On the other hand, if *growth* is over-emphasized and our status ignored, Christians easily swing away from love and grace back into law, merit and reward. If Christians do not feel that their status is something given in the past, they will assume it is something to be earned in the

* **Sons** Christians are equally identified with Christ and ‘in Him’, God’s Son, regardless of their sex (Galatians 3:28). Women’s equality with men is demonstrated by God’s offer to them to enjoy Christ’s Son-status equally with men, as ‘joint-heirs’, etc. (Romans 8:17). It is not sexist to talk of women’s ‘Sonship’ it would, rather, be sexist to invent a ‘daughtership’ which deprived them of their full inheritance!

future. Undue importance is then given to good works. Those with good religious discipline will feel hopeful that God may be reached; those less successful will feel hope-less. The merit-tendency is ever near. We are all at heart *proud*, and find the pride in trying to reach God more congenial than the humility required to acknowledge that he has already reached us!

Growth for what?

We are commanded to love

- God,
- our neighbour, and
- ourselves [Mark 12:30-1].

Health and maturity consist largely in having each of these relationships in good order.

God, our creator, wants us to be good, just as those who make and repair lawnmowers or sharpen scissors want them to be ‘good’ as a result of their work. The ‘goodness’ that God requires consists not in being super-pious or religious fanatics, but quite simply in being **really good** at this **triple-loving** (of God, neighbour and self) **for which he has designed us**.

‘Spiritual growth -?’

Although I have already used this term ‘spiritual growth’ it here carries a question mark. Why? Because *Christian growth* cannot be just concerned with ‘spiritual growth’. Unlike angels we’re not just ‘spiritual’. Our wholeness and holiness cannot somehow be confined to our ‘spiritual’ bit, any more than Christ’s wholeness and holiness can be separated from his relationships, his behaviour, his priorities, his words, his teaching, his example, his living, his suffering and his dying.

Growth may be defined in many ways, and St. Luke has as good a summary as any in 2:52, when he describes Christ growing up

In **wisdom**
In **stature**
In **favour with God**
And with **men**

As Christ grew up

- mentally,
- physically,
- spiritually and
- socially,

so Christian maturity means *full growth at all levels* - these four and all others. We increase daily in the Holy Spirit to grow fully and to live well.

Christian Growth

It is possible that you are reading this article hoping for a bit of a pep-up in your prayer-life, or a rekindling of your love of God, or in the hope that it would give you a shot-in-the-arm as far as your spiritual life is concerned! Great!! It should indeed do that – but growing in the Spirit is much, much more!

The important thing to realise is that growth ‘in the Spirit’ is *not just growth in things spiritual*. Daily growth in the Spirit will touch, and should touch, - **US!** Everything we are and have been; everything we think and speak and do; everything we want and everything we decide; every relationship we enjoy and all the ones we do not; our priorities; our fears and fantasies; our sexuality and longings; our thoughts; our diet; our hobbies; our space; our time; our possessions... Everything will in due course be touched by the Holy Spirit if we are to grow as he wishes.

All Change!

It has been said of the Holy Spirit that he comforts the disturbed and disturbs the comfortable! Invitations to the Holy Spirit welcome total upheaval and the disturbance of everything, Beware!

This ought not really to surprise us, for growth is about change and the characteristic of life is movement. That which doesn’t move or change is dead – that’s the difference we immediately notice between beef and cow!

Suppose you were to write down the changes that have taken place in your life since you were six years old...!!! If that would entail ‘virtually everything’ we must not be surprised when ‘Christian growth’ touches ‘virtually everything’ also.

If we do not fully grasp that Christian growth - growing in the Spirit - is something *total* we will not see or understand the Holy Spirit’s working in all the different areas of our lives. If we expect his concern to be only ‘spiritual’, we shall not be alerted to co-operate with his growth-changes at the levels of relationships, memories, habits, priorities, possessions, etc.

‘Full of the Spirit’

This phrase is often used but can be misleading. It should not be understood as of water in a bucket, but rather as of love in a marriage. It is more about quality than quantity. If I experience a ‘filling’ of the Holy Spirit today that does not mean either that I was empty yesterday or that a re-filling tomorrow will not be necessary. (See the article ***Blessings – Helping to Retain Them*** for further teaching on the purpose of blessing).

It is a trap of the Devil to mislead Christians into thinking that some experience of the Holy Spirit (however genuine) has ‘filled’ them for all time! This is a certain way to ensure that at the end they’ll not be filled at all!

Wise teachers of life in the Spirit, if they use the language of filling, often quip that the main problem is our tendency to leak! (although the term ‘use up’ might be more accurate).

Come, come, come!

The Church has always invited the Spirit – *Come! Come! Come!* This never implies that in between times the Spirit has departed. To pray for the ‘coming’ of the Spirit does not imply his absence; to pray for the ‘filling’ of the Holy Spirit does not imply our emptiness.

Sadly it is sometimes true that the very reality of a past Spirit-experience discourages some Christians from asking him to ‘come’ again, lest to do so might be thought in some way to deny past blessings or detract from them.

Thirst quenching and thirst making

It is the work of the Spirit himself to make us want him more!

He satisfies our thirst and makes us yet more thirsty! (Some lovers might experience the satisfaction given them by the Beloved creates an even greater yearning).

A hunger for God and a *thirst* for his Spirit are one of the surest signs of the *presence* of God and his Spirit!

Cleansing

The coming of the Holy Spirit is often thought of in terms of water being ‘poured out’ [e.g. Acts 2:17, 10:45]. The cleansing action of water usually requires the use of the drain as well as the tap. The inflowing of what is clean needs to be accompanied by the outflowing of what is dirty. If you have ever had to clean out a fish pond you will quickly realize that clear water by itself cannot do it, sooner or later, you – or preferably someone else! – has to begin a direct onslaught on the muck and filth.

It is easy to assume that daily growth in the Holy Spirit will cleanse wholly without our having to give our attention to the muck! Miracles of muck-clearing do occur – but more usually God’s Spirit demands our ruthless and rigorous onslaught against it.

I am convinced that why so many spiritual blessings start off so promisingly but then seem to fade away is because Christians enjoy the waters of the Spirit but do not tackle the muck of their lives – and in fact exert considerable efforts to retain it!

Muck

If the Spirit of Holiness is invited we cannot at the same time wilfully retain that which is not holy.

Daily to increase in the Holy Spirit more and more requires not, as we might expect, merely the daily invitation for his cleansing and in-pouring, but also the active daily removal of waste, stain and dirt, so that fresh living waters may indeed cleanse us.

Receiving and removing

Daily growth in the Spirit means –

- A daily willingness to renounce afresh the world, the flesh and the devil.
- A daily resolve to live subject to Jesus Christ-
‘In your hearts enthrone him
There let him subdue
All that is not holy,
All that is not true.’

This verse needs to be pondered, since we so easily assume that we have the right to retain that which is not holy and that which is not true. We cannot daily grow in the Spirit if daily we retain the resentments, the hurts, the wrongs, the memories, and the desires which we know are neither holy nor true. We are not free to promote the unholiness of others (gossip), or to retain it by anger or resentment.

I am constantly saddened when the inevitable negative elements in Christians’ lives are not allowed to wither, but are regularly fed and watered by recalling and retelling – and retelling again!

If we want the cleansing of the Holy Spirit daily we cannot at the same time have daily habits of speech, thought, reading, relationship or pleasure, that soil us. Does our choice of e.g. newspaper and entertainment assist the Holy Spirit’s cleansing work in us or set it back!

A New Focus

St. Paul urged us to **go-on-being-renewed in the Holy Spirit** [Ephesians 4:23, the Greek indicates an on-going continuous action]. It is no accident that he also encouraged us to focus on what is **true, honest, just, pure, lovely and of good report** [Philippians 4:8]. This is particularly difficult in the western world, when it is assumed that the majority of ‘news’, entertainment and interesting conversation should be the exact opposite!

It is unfortunate that the Holy Spirit is so often called simply the ‘Spirit’, for we must not allow ourselves to forget that he and his work are ever *holy*. He cannot bless *un*-holiness even if he is prayerfully invoked every five minutes! He can only combat it! His work to make us holy grows in our lives only insofar as we do not cherish, invite, retain, recall, enjoy and indulge in *un*-holiness.

Throwing off

The language of the New Testament is quite clear that the Christian life and its growth requires not just putting on and receiving [Romans 13:14, Colossians 2:6] but taking-off, putting away and casting-aside [Ephesians 4:22, 31, Colossians 2:11].

As with so much else, Christians tend to emphasise one at the expense of the other. Some are strong in their emphasis on cleansing while others are strong on their emphasis on filling!

- Spiritual cleanliness can be sterile without Spirit-filling.
- Spirit-filling can be superficial without spiritual cleansing.

The Evangelical chorus has it right –

‘Cleans me from my sin, Lord,
Put thy power within, Lord...’

- Uncleanness empowered is dangerous.
- Cleanliness unpowered is ineffective.

Blossoming?

We all know that the growth of a flower cannot be accomplished by the sun and rain alone, but it has to be regularly cleared of weeds that might kill it – the positive and negative actions of nurturing.

Christian growth requires Christian weeding!

[See the article on this website *The Wilderness: The Christian Experience*].

Abba and Lord

Do not attempt to measure the Holy Spirit by your direct experience of him. His nature is to draw us closer to the Father and to Jesus –

- to experience God as ‘Abba’ (Father),
- and to experience Jesus as ‘Lord’ [Romans 8:15, 1 Corinthians 12:3].

He does not point us to himself nor does he permit our Spirit-experience to be Spirit-centred.

It is no accident that at Jesus’s Baptism in the Jordan, what the Holy Spirit brought to him was an experience not of himself but of the Father and of his relationship to him as that of a beloved Son [Mark 1:9-11].

When we draw closer by the Spirit to our Father and our Lord, we begin to appreciate what they love and suffer at what pains them. Many things cease to be neutral. The environment, for instance, becomes for us more deeply the Father’s Creation and its stewardship a Spiritual issue. The Father’s poor and persecuted children are felt to be of the same family as ourselves...

As the Spirit draws us nearer to our Lord, so all that speaks of him – of whatever Christian tradition – comes alive for us. His Cross becomes more painful – his Resurrection more glorious. His ministry becomes ours – and his motives too. The angels who supported him and the devil who attacked him are nearer and more real as we walk closer to Jesus.

The world, loved by the Father and for whom the Son died begins to be the object of our love – and hence of our mission.

This article cannot provide an exhaustive outline of what the Spirit does, but such pointers as I have been able to give show that we should expect him to leave nothing untouched!

Much of this article has been about the sort of Christian growth that the Spirit enables so that those who might be thinking of a ‘daily growing in the Spirit’ might have some idea what they are letting themselves in for!

Practical Steps

Here are some practical steps for those who wish ‘daily to increase in the Holy Spirit more and more...’

- This includes all the elements of normal Christian growth about which so much is written – fellowship, worship, teaching, study, discipline, etc. It does not bypass these things.
- Pray daily for the Spirit (see 3 and 7 below) and expect some daily action of cleansing to be necessary (see section Cleansing above).
- Many **hymns** make fine prayers, since virtually all hymns about the Holy Spirit are invitations to him:
Breath on me Breath of God, ... Come down O Love Divine, ... Come Holy Ghost our souls inspire, ... Come Holy Spirit, Lord and God, ... Come thou Holy Spirit come, ... Gracious Spirit Holy Ghost, ... O Breath of Life come sweeping through us, ... O Holy Ghost thy people bless, ... Spirit of the Living God, ... Our blest Redeemer, ... Spirit of mercy, ... Spirit working in creation.
- **Scripture.** Reflect on the Holy Spirit’s work as revealed in the Scriptures. (Note that not every reference to the ‘Spirit’ in a concordance necessarily refers to the third person of the Trinity.) Among the obvious passages for such reflection are:
Psalm 51, Isaiah 11:1-5, 44:1-5, 61:1-3. Ezekiel 36:24-28, 37:1-10.
Joel 2:28-32.
Luke 1:26-38, 39-56, Matthew 3:1-12, 13-17.
Matthew 4:1-11, Luke 4:14-22, 11:1-13, Matthew 12:22-32.
Luke 12:8-12, John 3:1-8, 4:4-24, 14:15-31, 15:26-27, 16:4-15.

Matthew 28:16-20, Mark 16:14-20, Luke 24:36-53, John 20:19-23.
Acts 1:1-11, 2:1-13, 14-47, 4:23-35, 8:14-17, 9:1-19, 10:44-48, 11:4-18,
13:2-12, 15:1-13, 19:1-11, 20:16-38.
Romans 5:1-11, 8:1-17, 18-30.
1 Corinthians 2:1-16, 6:9-20, 12:1-11, 12-31, 13:1-13, 14:1-40.
2 Corinthians 1:18-22, 3:17-18, 4:13-5:5, 6:3-10.
Galatians 3:1-14, 4:1-7, 5:1-6, 16-26, 6:7-10. Ephesians 1:3-14, 2:17-22,
3:14-20, 4:1-16,
29-32, 5:15-21, 6:10-18. Philippians 3:1-3. 1 Thessalonians 1:4-6, 4:1-8,
5:12-24.
1 Timothy 4:6-16. 2 Timothy 1:3-14. Hebrews 6:1-6. 1 Peter 1:1-2, 10-13,
4:12-16.
1 John 2:20-27, 4:1-6, 7-21. Jude 17-25. Revelation 21:5-7 (cf. John 7:37-39),
22:16-17.

- **Fear not!** Although I have outlined something of the cost and disturbance of inviting the Holy Spirit, do not fear that you will be taken over by an alien force! He is a person, and is one with Christ’s love and respect for you. He will take you where you are willing to go, if you draw back, he will understand, and will wait and nudge – he will not drag you forward kicking and screaming! He is fire when he needs to be but breath when he needs to be – and knows which is appropriate for you at any given time!
- **Fellowship.** Don’t, if possible, go it alone. Share something of your spiritual intentions and practices with another Christian leader or friend.

Some Prayers -

- Based on Ephesians 3:16-7

Father,
Out of your glorious riches
Strengthen me with power
in my inner being
through the Holy Spirit,
that Christ may dwell in my heart

- Based on Luke 24:46-49

Father,
As you have promised
clothe me this day
with power from on high,
that I may witness to Christ
and his Resurrection

- A prayer composed specially for this article –
[Any musician want to set it to music?]

*By your grace outpoured and flowing
Holy Spirit help my growing;
Abba, Father, daily knowing;
Christ in me more clearly showing.
Fire and love on me bestowing
For my witness and my going.*

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