CATCH THE FIRE

The Toronto Blessing

An experience of renewal and revival

Preface by John Arnott, Senior Pastor of the Toronto Airport Vineyard
CHAPTER SIX

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Summary and Synthesis

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.
(Luke 3:16)

There is a story, set in the deserts of Egypt, and at least fifteen hundred years old, that serves as a metaphor, a picture, for the renewing, reviving work of God at the Toronto Airport Vineyard. It takes place between two monks, a junior and a senior; two men who have committed their lives to loving God with all their hearts, and practising hospitality and blessing to any who would come for counsel and spiritual guidance, for prayer, ministry and healing.

Brother Lot went to see Brother Joseph and said: 'Brother, as much as I am able, I practise a little fasting, some prayer and meditation, and remain quiet, and as much as possible, I keep my thoughts clean. What else should I do?'

The old man stood up and stretched out his hands towards heaven, and his fingers became like ten torches of flame. He said, 'Become FIRE!!!'

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While not diminishing the importance of the spiritual disciplines in the least, the story is declarative of what has been the experience of thousands of men and women who hunger to answer Christ's call on their lives. As Martyn Lloyd-Jones has stated, 'the Church today needs to be aroused, to be awakened, to be filled with a spirit of glory, for she is failing in the modern world.' With best-intentioned efforts, innumerable pastors and leaders have come under the counsel of growth and business management strategies, and many have run aground, if not exhausted themselves and the churches they serve, in their attempts to bring new life to troubled institutions. Some have bankrupted themselves asking, yet again, 'What else should I do?'

G. Campbell Morgan names the contrast in his reflections on the Welsh revival of 1904-1905:

If you and I could stand above Wales, looking at it, you would see fire breaking out here and there, and yonder, and somewhere else, without any collusion or pre-arrangement. It is a divine visitation in which God — let me say this reverently — in which God is saying to us, 'See what I can do without the things you are depending on; 'See what I can do in answer to a praying people'; 'See what I can do through the simplest who are ready to fall in line and depend wholly and absolutely upon Me.'


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In that spirit of divine encounter, the Scriptural witness to the manifest presence of the Spirit is always marked by bold, declarative and experiential language. On receiving the revelation of the coming of the Lord's glory, the prophet Habakkuk says:

I hear, and my body quakes; my lips quiver at the sound; weakness overcomes my limbs, and my feet totter in their tracks; I long for the day of disaster to dawn over our assailants... I shall exult in the Lord and rejoice in the God who saves me. The Lord God is my strength; He makes me as sure-footed as a hind and sets my feet on the heights. (Habakkuk 3:3-4, 16, 18-19).

The Apostle Paul pushes the experiential to the forefront when he says: 'To prove that you are sons, God has sent into our hearts the Spirit of His Son, crying, Abba, Father! You are therefore no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, an heir by God's own act' (Galatians 4:6-7; see also Romans 8:14-17). The adopting, transforming and energizing power of the Spirit is not religious fluff and splash — it is the very spirituality and mission of the Church of the Risen Christ.

Throughout the history of the Church, the experience of the renewing, reviving work of the Spirit is the very dynamism that breathes vitality and re-formation into
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what is prone to degenerate into empty ritual and institutionalism. A brief historical summary demonstrates this fact.

In the journals that John Wesley kept there are recorded numerous accounts of the manifestations of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. A small sample follows.

At New Year's 1739, George Whitefield, my brother Charles, three others and I, with about sixty of our brethren, were present at a love feast in Fetter Lane. About three in the morning, as we were continuing in prayer, the power of God came upon us so mightily that many cried out in holy joy, while others were knocked to the ground. As soon as we were recovered a little from awe and amazement at the presence of God, we broke out in one voice, 'We praise Thee, O God; we acknowledge Thee to be the Lord.'

Thursday, preaching at Newgate...one, then another, and another sunk to the earth; they dropped on every side as if thunderstruck. One of them cried aloud. We besought God on her behalf and He turned her heaviness into joy. A second being in the same agony, we called upon God for her also; He spoke peace unto her soul.

Friday evening I went to a society at Wapping, weary in body and faint in spirit...After I had finished preaching and was earnestly inviting all sinners to enter into the holiest by this new and living way, many of those who had heard began to call upon God with strong cries and tears. Some sank down, having no strength remaining in them. Others trembled and quaked exceedingly. Some were torn with a kind of convulsive motion in every part of their bodies, often so violently that sometimes four or five persons could not hold one of them. I have seen many hysterical and many epileptic fits, but in most respects none of them were like these. I immediately prayed that God would not allow those who were weak to be offended.

A less well-known figure named Daniel Rowland served as one of the revival preachers in Wales. Letters written to his friend George Whitefield record some of the unforgettable scenes witnessed:

While one is praying, another is laughing; some howl and beat their hands together; others are weeping and groaning; and others are grovelling on the ground in a swoon, making various kinds of antic postures; then they laugh out all at once, and continue laughing for about a quarter of an hour.

The power that continues with [Brother Rowland] is uncommon. Such crying out and heart-breaking groans, silent weeping and holy joy and shouts of rejoicing, I never saw. 'Tis very common when he

* Ibid., ll.182.
preaches for scores to fall down by the power of the Word, pierced and wounded or overcome by the love of God, and sights of the beauty and excellency of Jesus . . . Some lie [on the floor] for hours, some praising and admiring Jesus; others waiting for words to utter. You might read the language of a heart running over with love in their heavenly looks, their eyes sparkling with the fire of love and joy and solid rest in God.8

On another occasion, the bi-polar reactions to the Spirit's ministry in Rowland's preaching were described as follows:

Some souls in this meeting were feasting at their heavenly Father's table. Some were drunk, and that with the best wine, namely, the Holy Spirit, God's peace, God's love shed abroad in their hearts by the Holy Ghost. Some prominent people scorn and deride this, but it is the substance of religion.9

This love/hate response to the dynamics of renewal and revival is a characteristic response to the outpouring of God's Spirit down through the ages, and is easily traced at the Airport Vineyard meetings. In an article published in the Christian Research Newsletter, the 'holy laughter at the Ontario Vineyard' is more than cautiously described.

. . . Pastor John Arnott [made] reference to themes

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8 Ibid., p.217.
9 Ibid., p.380.
gone guilt, gone fear, gone a timid, cowardly spirit, lack of love, envy, suspicion . . . and in their place came love, faith, hope, a joyful spirit, with a glorious multitude of the graces of the Holy Spirit."

Even with such declarative witness to liberating gospel dynamics, the question is always being asked: 'Is this a genuine work of God?' Back in 1762, the following assessment was given, and it more than serves as the question is brought forward in our day:

It is not only by means of outward manifestations, such as shouting, jumping, laughing, that I conclude that God is in the Church and is visiting His people. Apart from the heavenly inclination on their spirits inciting their tongues to a lively praising of God, this fire burns in the life and behaviour of so many of them . . . . They are zealous, not for secondary matters of faith, but for the essential issues of salvation. Faith and love are the chief graces they cry for . . . .

Those that give their testimony at the Airport Vineyard come from all walks of life. Some struggle for words that adequately describe what they have experienced; some are gifted with an eloquence that enables them to give almost poetic expression to the work of the Spirit. Such was the case with Henry Alline, a preacher of the

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12 Ibid., p.321.
time, had a population of 1,800. Of one of the leading evangelists was a frontiersman named Peter Cartwright, a circuit rider with the Methodist Episcopal Church. He had calculated that he preached at least 14,600 sermons, received into the Church at least 10,000 adult members, and baptized almost the same number of children. In his *Autobiography*, Cartwright comments on the 'mighty power of God' that was witnessed at the camp meetings: the following are his reflections on one of the phenomenon witnessed.

In the midst of our controversies on the subject of the powerful exercises among the people under preaching, a new exercise broke out among us, called the *jerks*, which was overwhelming in its effect upon the bodies and minds of the people. No matter whether they were saints or sinners, they would be taken under a warm song or sermon, and seized with a convulsive jerking all over, which they could not by any possibility avoid, and the more they resisted the more they jerked. If they would not strive against it and pray in good earnest, the jerking would usually abate. I have seen more than five hundred persons jerking at one time in my large congregations. Most usually persons taken with the jerks, to obtain relief, as they said, would rise up and dance. Some would run, but could not get away. Some would resist; on such the jerks were generally very severe.


To see those proud young gentlemen and young ladies, dressed in their silks, jewelry, and prunella, from top to toe, take the *jerks*, would often [cause me to laugh!] The first jerk or so, you would see their fine bonnets, caps, and combs fly; and so sudden would be the jerking of the head that their long loose hair would crack almost as loud as a wagoner's whip.

The 'jerks' is one of the manifestations witnessed at the Airport meetings, and it is very funny to watch one so affected! By times, it is as if someone hits the 'afflicted' with a cattle prod, so violent is the response. It is, however, not the outward reaction, but the inner transformation that is of consequence. Though suffering erratic convulsions, one man was so grateful for the newness of life he experienced in Christ, that he proudly wore a T-shirt he had printed: 'I'm a JERK FOR JESUS!'

Peter Cartwright not only documents the manifestation; he records his reflection and evaluation of the phenomenon:

I always looked upon the jerks as a judgement sent from God, first, to bring sinners to repentance; and, secondly, to show professors that God could work with or without means, and that He could work over and above means, and do whatsoever seemed [to] Him good, to the glory of His grace and the salvation of the world.  

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He notes that many ‘weak-minded, ignorant and superstitious persons’ fake the jerks, so as to draw attention to themselves; nevertheless, ‘with many, it was involuntary’. Cartwright’s practice was to recommend to those jerking the practice of fervent prayer as remedy. ‘It almost universally proved an effective antidote’.

Revival leaders down through the ages have continuously stressed that the physical and emotional manifestations of the Spirit’s presence must never be the index of spiritual power or even reality. William Blair comments on the particular phenomenon of ‘prostration, what is commonly called striking down’. He forthrightly titles his treatise, Things Which Have Been Seen And Heard; the revival he is documenting took place in Northern Ireland, August 1859. He states:

Too little as well as too much has been made of the singular physical features of this great revival. By some they are regarded as [abnormal and excessive]. I do not think so. They have accompanied all revivals...I care not what sceptics may say, or little-faith Christians, who have no confidence in the extraordinary influences of the Spirit. I believe, as firmly as I believe my own existence, that the Holy Ghost would never have permitted His work to be entangled with such perplexing and seemingly incredible phenomena, had He not had a most important end to serve by them.

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Blair concludes his work with three testimonies, one of which is the report of a man who ‘was overcome and lay quiet for six hours, and then got peace’. He had stuttered from birth, and was ‘miraculously restored to speech’, and healing certified by a local notary. He was also delivered from his ‘inordinate addiction’ to tobacco and spirits.

In 1892 an outburst of criticism brought indictment against Ralph Horner, an ex-Methodist evangelist who travelled the Ottawa Valley of Ontario and Quebec. He was accused of ‘preaching prostration’, because so many came under the power of the Spirit when he ministered. Like Wesley before him, Horner believed that while it was not appropriate to call people to fall down, neither did he condemn it. He never encouraged physical manifestations or contended for them; as it is recorded in the Memoirs compiled by his wife, ‘he maintained that under the mighty outpouring of the Holy Spirit such scenes would follow’.

Revival phenomena have been well documented in outpourings of the Spirit in more recent history. Richard Riss’ Survey of Twentieth Century Revival Movements in North America serves as a helpful description and assessment of the early Pentecostal outpouring, the ‘latter rain’ movement of the 1940s and 50s, the Jesus People, and the charismatic renewal.

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"Ibid.
"Ibid., p.58.
Students of revival will have been familiar with many of the leaders mentioned in this summary, and they will have their own favourite stories to re-tell. The history of revival dynamisms, however, is not confined to the last two hundred and fifty years. Howard Snyder helpfully traces God's renewing work, focusing on four movements that illuminate what he describes as the reshaping of the Church: Montanism, the Church's 'first charismatic movement'; German Pietism under Johann Arndt's leadership; Moravianism, Count Zinzendorf and the Herrnhut community; and Methodism and the cell-based structure initiated by John Wesley.\(^{31}\)

Snyder's study can easily be complemented, for throughout the history of the early centuries of the Church, there are eloquent witnesses to the renewing, reviving work of the Spirit of God. Hilary of Poitiers, a theologian whose writings influenced Augustine and Ambrose, wrote a work titled, *On the Trinity* (356-359), and another, a *Treatise on the Psalms* (364-367). In both, he writes about baptism and the impartation of the Holy Spirit in the believer's life. Hilary comments on Jesus' invitation in John 7:37-39, 'If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. Whoever believes in Me, as Scripture says, "Streams of living water shall flow from within him"'.

The Holy Spirit is called a river. When we receive the Holy Spirit, we are made drunk. Because out of us, as a source, various streams of grace flow, the prophet prays that the Lord will inebriate us. The prophet wants the same persons to be made drunk, and filled to all fullness with the divine gifts, so that their generation may be multiplied. This means that the good earth is compared in the gospel simile to the seed of the word, bearing fruit thirty, sixty and a hundred fold.

We who have been reborn through the sacrament of baptism experience intense joy when we feel within us the first stirrings of the Holy Spirit. We begin to have insight into the mysteries of faith, we are able to prophesy and to speak with wisdom. We become steadfast in hope and receive the gifts [plural] of healing. Demons are made subject to our authority.

These gifts enter us like a gentle rain, and once having done so, little by little, bring forth fruit in abundance. When this gentle rain falls, the earth rejoices. The rains are multiplied so that, at first, there are small streams; the streams then become raging rivers, so that they become mighty rivers.\(^{31}\)

Hilary makes at least two points explicitly: one, that God is exceedingly generous in pouring out His Spirit; and two, that the *end* and *purpose* of the outpouring is mission and ministry.

Roughly ten years later, another of the Church

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Fathers, Basil the Great, Archbishop of Caesarea, authored a treatise titled *On the Holy Spirit*. He wrote the work because of a movement known as the Arian heresy. Central to the theological distortion that Arius imposed was the lowering of the dignity of both Jesus and the Holy Spirit: speaking of the Trinity, Arius maintained, ‘There is a triad, not in equal glories.’

In his defence of the Spirit, Basil writes of the present-day ministry of the Paraclete, the Revealer (John 14:26; 16:7-15). On the forefront of the Spirit’s work is a renewing, reviving dynamism that produces mission, and growth in holiness.

Just as when a sunbeam falls on bright and transparent bodies, they themselves become brilliant too, and shed forth a fresh brightness from themselves, so souls wherein the Spirit dwells, illumined by the Spirit, themselves become spiritual, and send forth their grace to others.

[From the Spirit] comes foreknowledge of the future, understanding of mysteries, apprehension of what is hidden, the distribution of wonderful charisms (gifts), a citizenship in heaven, a *dance with angels* and *joy without end*, resting in God, and highest of all, [Christlikeness].

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**Ibid., pp.15-16.**

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Even if one should literally ‘dance with Angels’, such ecstasy is secondary. Though it has been sounded again and again, it needs to be reiterated: while an outpouring of the manifest presence of the Spirit of God often generates unusual religious experience and phenomena, the focus must never be on the shaking, falling, wailing or roaring, as commanding as these manifestations may be. They are but signals, or pointers, to a much larger dynamism.

A simple illustration is helpful. Most of us have a driver’s licence; many of us own a car. Very few of us have either just so that we can sit in the driver’s seat and operate the turn indicators. We have our licences, and own our vehicles, in order to get somewhere; signalling the journey lets others know where we’re headed, and as such, is helpful, but relatively incidental. Some, in fact, travel without signalling; they arrive at their destination nonetheless.

From the first chapter of this book, recall Annie Dillard’s reflections on worship – that in offering ourselves to the Lord, God indeed chooses to ‘draw us out to where we can never return’. This has been the case for countless thousands who have received the Lord’s outpouring of grace upon grace. The visitation of the Spirit at the Toronto Airport Vineyard has forced many of us to reshuffle pre-suppositions and expectations; it has knocked out the ends of the box in which we had neatly contained our God. We have re-oriented ourselves, and are beginning to understand the truth that Eduard Schweizer declares: ‘Long before the Spirit was a theme
of doctrine, He was a \textit{fact} in the experience of the \[early Church\].^{18} A spirit of repentance has risen up, for with new eyes to see, we realize that we have boxed God in quite tidily; many of us have lived, operatively, believing in \textit{'Father, Son, and Holy Book'}; and we confess to having trifled with the charge of being Christ’s ambassadors.

Many of us have now touched, as never before, something of our Lord’s resurrection power and presence, the very realities of the Gospel. We know more of holy fear and holy joy. Much is still a mystery; but with the unanswered questions, there has risen up a healthy humility and openness to receive what the Sovereign Lord has for His Church. As this move of God continues to gain momentum, as hundreds gather night after night, and as pastors and leaders return to their churches all around the world, this renewing, reviving work of God has been, for thousands, an \textit{awakening}.

Joseph Hazzaya and his writings serve by way of conclusion. Hazzaya is one of the great Syrian theologians, welding together what is so frequently kept poles apart – dynamic spiritual experience, and speculative understanding. As a monk, he was known as \textit{'Abdisho}, \textit{'The Seer'}. The details of his life are unclear; he lived through the turn of the eighth century. In his

\textit{Book of Questions}, he addresses the same issues that caused me to write this book: \textit{How the Spirit which works \textit{in us} is known, in what His power is revealed, and what is the sign by which the Spirit makes manifest His working \textit{in us}}. Hazzaya writes nearly 1300 years ago, and uses beautiful, though somewhat unfamiliar language and phraseology to describe the impartation of the Spirit that the believer receives at baptism. With wise counsel undiminished over time, he marks four signals of the Spirit’s powerful presence:

The first sign of the effective working of the Spirit is when the love of God burns in the heart of a man like fire . . .

The second sign through which you will feel that the Spirit which you received from baptism is working in you, consists in true humility being born in your soul . . . It is from humility that peace, meekness and endurance of tribulations are born in the soul.

The third sign of the working of the Spirit in you consists in the [compassion] which represents within you the image of God, through which, when your thoughts extend to all men, tears flow from your eyes like fountains of water, as if all men were dwelling in your heart, and you affectionately embrace them and kiss them, while you pour your kindness on all. When you remember them, your heart is kindled with the power of the working of the Spirit in you as with fire, and from this, goodness and kindness are born in your heart.

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The fourth sign of the working of the Spirit which you received in baptism consists in the illumined vision of your mind... It is this vision that receives the light of the Holy Trinity. From this... you will derive a flow of spiritual speech and the knowledge of both worlds: of the one that has passed and the one that shall pass, and also a consciousness of the mysteries of future things, the fine sounds of the spiritual intelligences: joy, jubilation, exultation, glorification, songs, hymns, and odes of magnification.

The above are the signs, which if you find in yourself, you will know that the Holy Spirit, which you received from the holy baptism, is working in you.26

If we move from a consideration of water baptism, to the prophetic announcement of John the Baptist, that the coming Messiah ‘will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire’, all of this takes on even greater consequence. The phrase, ‘He will baptize’ is a technical one, taken from the wool market. Raw wool was plunged into a vat of dye, stirred around and around until the whole thing was saturated in the colour of the dye. The Greek word to describe this process comes from the root baptizao, ‘to baptize’.

The prophet presents us with a graphic picture. ‘He will baptize you... with the Holy Spirit and with fire.’ As we are baptized in the Spirit, and the fire of God, we are, as it were, plunged, stirred about, and saturated. It may be that some of the unusual physical manifestations witnessed at the Airport Vineyard can be understood as the Lord saturating His people with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

Many of us who have come to the meetings recognize that we’re ‘tie-dyed’ believers.

Tie-dying was a fashion vogue twenty years ago; T-shirts were tied in knots, and then ‘baptized’ into various pots of dye. When dry, they were untied, and patterns resulted showing differentiated colour penetration.

Each of us have areas of our lives that are knotted up; some of us have whole sections of our lives closed off such that they don’t get all fired up, and drenched in the Holy Spirit. Consequently, those bits don’t carry the ‘colour’ they’re supposed to.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ declares that God’s Spirit is forever untangling us, untying our knots, letting us loose, and ‘saturating’ our very being, so that we become more and more like Christ.

If we are to Catch the Fire, it is to each of us to say ‘Yes Lord,’ and let the Spirit release what needs releasing, and fill what needs filling.

By God’s grace, may we indeed live out our baptism in Spirit and fire.


S.D.C