

Kosovo, and Rwanda. God is up to something in our own lives, leading us into God's reality/dream/commonwealth/kingdom. We are called to awaken to that movement and open our eyes and ears to what God is doing.

We hope because we know the future is not up to us! In Presbyterian fashion, we emphasize that it is God who saves. It is God who will redeem the world, not our own feeble, or strong-armed, human efforts. We have a responsibility to respond to God's activities in our midst, but our hope rests in God and not only in ourselves. It is God who brings in a new creation as we despair of the old. It is God who acts for the salvation of the world, where we are unsure of new possibilities.

We hope because, in our very human community called the church, we experience God's new reality. In the ways we care for one another and the poor and lost in the world, we point to God's coming kingdom. When we gather for the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, we are looking to a time when people shall gather around the Lord's Table and there shall be no racial or economic barriers between us. When we worship as a community, we are living toward the coming world where all live in joy and praise of our Creator. When we enjoy the party of the Spirit's fellowship together, we celebrate the coming kingdom when all shall enjoy the bounty of God's love. We hope because we know God's reign/dream/commonwealth/reality is near at hand, and this is a good thing.

So What Do *You* Think?

1. What are the odds this week (a) that you will be met by Jesus coming down from the clouds? (b) that you will be met by Jesus in the encounter with a person in need? (c) that you will not meet Jesus at all?
2. How would you respond to someone who says, "If Jesus is not coming down from the clouds, there's nothing worth being prepared for. I might as well live only for my pleasure"?
3. If there was a web site on the internet that could tell you the date the world will end, would you check it out? What if it could tell you the date of your own death, would you want to know? Why do you think Jesus teaches that it is not for human beings to know or speculate about "the day and the hour" of "the end times"?

Do Presbyterians Have Spirit, or Do They Just Drink Them?

DANCING IN THE AISLES

Kevin had spent Saturday night with his best friend, Steve, so he went to Steve's church with him that morning. It was a worship experience very different from his own Presbyterian Church's worship. People were clapping and dancing in the aisles, some people had their hands in the air waving them around and saying, "Alleluia." One or two people were even shaking on the ground and saying strange words that sounded like gibberish. When Kevin asked his friend about what was going on, Steve told him they were speaking in tongues. "Don't you have the Holy Spirit at your church?" Steve queried. "I have heard Presbyterians aren't ever filled with the Holy Spirit. You don't even like to pray in public." Kevin didn't know what to say. He thought it was kind of fun to dance in worship, but he knew the people in his church would have a heart attack if anyone even clapped, much less got out of their seat. "Do we have any Spirit?" he wondered to himself.

DO YOU SPEAK IN TONGUES?

For many in the neo-evangelical tradition,¹ the presence of the Holy Spirit is an essential sign of one's holiness and rightness with God. For some, the presence of the Spirit is signified by certain manifestations such as speaking in tongues and being "slain in the Spirit" (a kind of fainting). There is even a phenomenon today in which persons "in the Spirit" laugh uncontrollably (we experience this every time we watch Robin Williams!).

Worship in the neo-evangelical tradition is characterized with highly emotional moments and opportunities for expressing one's faith personally. "Altar calls" offer an opportunity for persons, usually in a state of strong emotions, to come forward and turn their lives over to Jesus. Praise joined with tears is a common experience.

This makes sense in the neo-evangelical tradition, considering the importance placed on personal conversion. With so much invested in this moment of salvation, no

wonder worship becomes so filled with emotions. When people experience change, often from underlying circumstances that have been tragic or crisis producing, it is emotional! These moments can even be very inspiring and uplifting.

In fact, one of the strengths of "expressionist" types of neo-evangelicalism is the freedom of feeling and emotion expressed in worship. Much that people find attractive about the neo-evangelicals involves the emotional spirituality and inspiring music. In a jaded culture looking for emotional experiences, the neo-evangelical tradition provides a framework for "modern" human beings to touch and to express the deepest parts of their spiritual lives. We need worship, rituals, and music that touch our souls.

Indeed, when the Holy Spirit is truly present, people do experience something quite extraordinary. People need to experience something or someone larger than themselves. Call it transcendence. In addition to the need for experiencing transcendence, there is also a dimension of Spirit-experience that can only be described as joyful and fun. In fact, when the Holy Spirit first "descended" on the disciples, many who witnessed its manifestation thought the disciples were drunk.³ The neo-evangelicals remind those of us in other parts of the church that, more often than not, the best expression of worship is dancing in the aisles.

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. [And] you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

—Rabbi Jesus of Nazareth²

But, at its worst, this tradition also can distort worship into a setting for emotional manipulation, as if the Holy Spirit could be invoked using certain words or techniques. Preachers may try to manipulate the feelings of their congregation to get more and more people to come forward during the altar call as if the success of worship is measured by how many souls are saved.⁴ Preaching can be structured more for its emotional effect than its theological soundness, and music can be chosen more for the emotional effect it creates than for the aspect of faith it represents. In the worship of certain neo-evangelical fellowships, the "message" implied to the worship participants is that one's holiness is enhanced by one's ability to speak in tongues, as if there were a hierarchy of spiritual gifts among God's people. Put another way, the more spiritual gifts one manifests, the more one can suppose one is touched by God. In settings where worship and spiritual life are judged primarily on the extent and degree of emotional expression, most Presbyterians would say such worship and spiritual life run the risk of losing touch with the larger and more whole sense of God's Spirit.

The danger, ultimately, is that worship becomes more about human need than truly an act of worshiping God. It becomes more "me and my needs" than an event transcending our own particular egos. It is another dose of the sort of spiritual navel-gazing we already do all too well in our individualistic culture. Worship should touch our human concerns and feelings. It should incorporate those very human experiences in the worship of God. But human experiences are not ends in themselves. They serve a much larger purpose.

Presbyterians always understand worship and the movement of the Spirit to be communal. Worship is not just individual action but the work of a community of people seeking to express their awe and wonder and thanksgiving before the Creator of the universe. When the Holy Spirit descended on the early church, the Spirit did not come upon only one individual, but upon a community of people.⁵ The Spirit isn't simply for personal consumption or advancement, but for the empowering of a community to witness to God's kingdom. Worship isn't about me and what I want and need. It is about a God who calls me to serve and who gives me the Spirit to do so.

So, in short, the answer to the question of whether Presbyterians believe in speaking in tongues is a very strong yes and no. Yes, we believe the Holy Spirit can do things in the community of God's people beyond our own imaginations. Included in various manifestations of the Spirit can be a kind of spiritual ecstasy that, we realize, can be "out of our control."

(Immediately many Presbyterian-types will sense a "red-flag," signaling uneasiness with strong emotion.) No, we don't believe the gift of this Spirit is a kind of spiritual baptism appreciated most by those gifted individuals whom God has deemed worthy above all others. Yes, we believe the Spirit equips the church by empowering the community with a variety of gifts;⁶ and, no, we don't believe the Spirit intends for these gifts to be sole manifestations as ends in and of themselves.

In fact, Paul discusses this quite clearly in his writings to the church in Corinth.⁷ Some in Corinth were experiencing rather dramatic spiritual manifestations, of which speaking in tongues was one. Paul makes it clear that the purpose of the Spirit's gifts is not for individual honors but for serving the community at large. One gift from God's Spirit is not greater than another, and when those who speak in tongues exhibit this gift, it should be in service to the community's witness to the world. If it does not build up the community, it is useless, unnecessary, and even destructive.

We can be guided by Paul's wisdom here. Speaking in tongues can be part of the many gifts experienced by a community for the service of God's kingdom in the world. As a display of the Spirit's presence, its purpose is to help the church fulfill its purpose in the world. God grants the Spirit to the church not for our own ego building or emotional satisfaction but for the commissioning of the community to be the body of Christ here on earth.

CAN THE PRESBYTERIAN FROZEN CHOSEN BE THAWED?

As stated before, the strength of many neo-evangelical groups is their comfort with emotion in the spiritual life. For Presbyterians, the label "frozen chosen" has often been applied as a joke about our discomfort with emotion. In most Presbyterian churches, worship is a rather staid affair, with a rote pattern of standing and sitting, of following a liturgy in a particular way and form. It has been said that Presbyterians can't worship without a bulletin in their hands. God help us if someone actually clapped in worship.⁸ We do indeed seem to be frozen in our pews.

One reason for this particular characteristic in our churches is our emphasis on the intellect or the mental aspects of religious life. Presbyterians always have stressed loving God with our minds. We require of our clergy and seek for our laity a particular level of education, and there is a general expectation of sound scholarship in preaching and teaching.⁹ Theological reflection and discussion play an important role in our churches. We value using our intelligence to further our spiritual

understanding and life, but sometimes, in our focus on the mind, we forget the heart.

Another reason for our hesitancy in displaying our spirituality in public is Jesus' warning to avoid practicing one's piety in public. In the Gospel of Matthew, in the section called the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warns his disciples not to practice piety before others so that others may see them. When you give to the poor, give in secret. When you pray, go to your room, shut the door, and pray in secret. When you fast, do not look dismal, but wash your face and comb your hair so that others may not see your fasting.¹⁰ We understand that the spiritual life is not about who is considered pious in public, nor is it about being perceived as being particularly spiritual. Instead, one's spirituality and piety are very much about humility and simplicity of heart.

Unfortunately, our stress on the intellect has meant a suspicion of the emotions. In the end, this may be more cultural than anything else, but we have tended to put less focus on nurturing the emotional aspects of our spiritual selves. We have abandoned the heart to pursue the mind, when both are needed for a complete spirituality. As we realize our shortcomings in this area, we can explore more fully how our brothers and sisters in the neo-evangelical tradition can help us discover something more, even parts of our own tradition which, for whatever reason, got left behind some time ago.

The question of whether we can be thawed is an appropriate one, though somewhat unnecessary because there are signs God already is defrosting us. Many Presbyterian churches are exploring more feeling-rich elements in worship and music.¹¹ There are new liturgical resources such as a "Service for Wholeness and Healing" and a "Reaffirmation of Baptismal Vows" that help us claim and practice more emotionally expressive parts of our spiritual life.¹² Several authors have written to help readers reclaim the spirituality of our tradition and make that spirituality part of our common life as members of the church.¹³ All these are noteworthy signs of the Spirit who is moving in our midst and calling us to a more complete love of God and our neighbor.

MOUNTAINTOP SPIRITUALITY OR VALLEY SPIRITUALITY?

In reclaiming our Presbyterian understanding of the spiritual life, we have come to realize that "spiritual" may mean to us something slightly different from what it means to our neo-evangelical brothers and sisters. To illustrate, let's look at a Bible story called "the transfiguration of Jesus," which is

found in three of the Gospel accounts.¹⁴ In this story, we are told that Jesus took Peter, James, and John up a mountain to pray. While they were praying, the disciples fell asleep. (We all are asleep in a symbolic way, aren't we?) When they "awoke," they saw a vision of Jesus with his face shining brightly, standing in glory with Elijah and Moses. This is a real spiritual high, though a little frightening.

Peter is so excited that he asks Jesus if he (Peter) can build three tents so they can all stay on the mountaintop. Peter was on a spiritual high, literally, and he wanted to stay there. But in the very next verses, we learn that Jesus and the disciples come down off the mountain and are met by a great crowd from which a man asks Jesus to heal his son.¹⁵ Jesus doesn't stay on the mountain. He reenters the world of hurting people.

In many ways, this story is symbolic of two different understandings of the spiritual life: mountaintop spirituality and valley spirituality. Mountaintop spirituality celebrates particularly powerful and emotional faith-experiences. Many neo-evangelical traditions significantly focus "for the success of salvation" on this emphasis, particularly in the worship aspect of spiritual life. Here again, single moments in time play an important role in the religious life, moments of being on a spiritual high, which believers carry with them throughout their lives. Such experiences shape who they are and their understanding of who they are to be. They continue to seek, week in and week out, these spiritual mountaintops, and, like Peter, want to build their tents there.

Another biblical illustration of this kind of spirituality is that of Paul. According to the book of Acts, Paul was originally Saul of Tarsus, a Jew who persecuted and helped kill the early Christians.¹⁶ But then, on his way to a city called Damascus to arrest any Christians there, he was struck down by a great light. A voice spoke to Paul out of the light. The voice was understood to be that of Jesus. Paul was struck blind by the light, and it wasn't until he later stayed at a Christian's house and was healed and filled with the Spirit that his vision returned. This is a powerful story of a spiritual high, a mountaintop experience of epic proportions. It is a radical conversion often referred to by many neo-evangelicals. For them, Paul serves as a metaphor for their understanding of God's powerful intervention in their lives.

Many Presbyterians, though, understand the greater portion of spiritual life as not living on the mountaintop. While some of us may have had powerful experiences of God, most of us would not claim to have been struck down by a great light, or heard the voice of Jesus, or seen a burning bush.¹⁷ Most of us encounter God in rather ordinary ways. For many of us, God is experienced mostly in valleys, rather than on mountaintops, among people

in pain and in need of healing. Reformed and Presbyterian-types might be characterized more by a valley spirituality than by a mountaintop type.

This sort of spiritual life is never lived out predominantly on the mountain but in the daily existence of relationships and responsibilities. Our spirituality is made up of the ordinary things of life, less about powerful experiences of conversion and more about the daily conversion of our lives to God. Grace is the everyday experience of God's sustenance and care, not only on the mountain but, most especially, in the valley of life.

It may be that Timothy, more than Paul, can be considered a model of this valley spirituality. Timothy was a young man nurtured in the faith by his grandmother and by his mother, and his is a faith that dwells in him passed down from generation to generation, a faith that is also a gift from God.¹⁸ This valley spirituality understands the Spirit as infiltrating all aspects of our lives, even the most humdrum. Call it "grace-based." (You knew we would get that word in there, didn't you?)

A grace-based spirituality celebrates the daily gifts of God found in each moment of every day. God is found not only in the burning bush of the mountain but in the everyday, normal life, in the mundane realities of our living, and in the experience of serving God in our work and in our play. Like the bread we eat during a celebration of the Lord's Supper, God is present to us in the ordinary elements of life. The bread that we eat in communion is not extraordinary, yet it becomes a symbol of how God's grace comes to us in our daily bread. The bread is not changed. We are.

Presbyterians can reclaim this understanding of valley spirituality. We live out such faith in this world amid messiness and confusion. We do not live on the mountain. We live and act in the daily chaos of people lost and in pain. In the midst of this uncertainty we experience the Spirit's presence gifting us with God's love and mercy.

WHY WE ARE SPIRIT FILLED!

Do Presbyterians have the Spirit? Most certainly! Maybe not in the ways a majority religious culture would like to understand it, or maybe not in a particularly dramatic fashion, but Presbyterians experience the Spirit every day, and we give thanks for the gift of God's sustaining presence.¹⁹ Ours is a grace-filled spirituality in which life is about giving thanks and appreciating what God has done with us and among us. We are filled with the Spirit, and we drink of the Spirit of God's life poured out for us and in us. We embrace the goodness of life even in its ordinarieness. This is what it truly means to be "awake in prayer."

In Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple*, Celie is a woman beaten down both by her husband and by life circumstances. She has been despairing of ever knowing the goodness of life, being all but dead in the spirit. Then she meets another woman who has a grace-based spirituality. This woman transforms the way Celie looks at the world around her. In a letter mailed back to her sister Nettie, Celie tells Nettie that God gets "pissed off" if you "walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't [stop and admire the beautiful flowers God has made]." ²⁰ God, according to Celie, feels shortchanged and miffed when God's people don't stop and celebrate God's relationship evident in the ordinariness of creation and life.

Don't leave God feeling shortchanged and miffed. Admire the color purple.

So What Do *You* Think?

1. Have you ever experienced personally or seen on television a service of worship that involved high emotionalism? If so, with respect for the people involved, describe what you saw and heard and what your thoughts were about it.
2. What guidelines would you offer to define when emotional expressions in worship are good and healthy and when they are not?
3. What did you think about the images in this chapter of "mountaintop" and "valley" spirituality? What kind of spirituality do you think most people have? What kind do you have?
4. Can you think of any times in your life when God has blessed you in seemingly "ordinary" encounters or events?

Why Don't You Repent in Dust and Ashes?

Seventeen-year-old William was in his bedroom at 9:15 p.m. on Easter Sunday evening. He picked up the television remote control, thinking he would channel surf for a few minutes before he went over his notes for his three-minute presentation in speech class the next day. After brief stops on channels offering dated cartoons, sitcoms, movies, music videos, and a major league baseball highlight show, he stopped switching long enough to watch a broadcast from a church sanctuary (or "worship center").

There were no lilies visible, so William wondered if this might be a tape-delayed broadcast from some previous week rather than this morning's service. Perhaps because it was Easter night, William found the preacher's words rather depressing in tone. He began the sermon by reading from various newspaper accounts of multiple murders, child abuse, spouse abuse, and adultery. It sounded to William as though this speaker was in a debate class arguing either for the proposition "Sin is rampant," or against the proposition "The world is basically good."

William watched longer than he originally intended, and longer, honestly, than he wanted. He watched long enough for the preacher to repeat previous points of his outline after each next point was explained. "I am persuaded," he said each time, "(first) in the sinfulness of human beings, (then) in the holiness of God, (then) in the atoning blood of Jesus Christ, and (then) in the regenerative power of the Holy Spirit." William surfed on

