

PARISH HOUSE

Newmarket Church of Christ



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THE SPIRIT OF GOD

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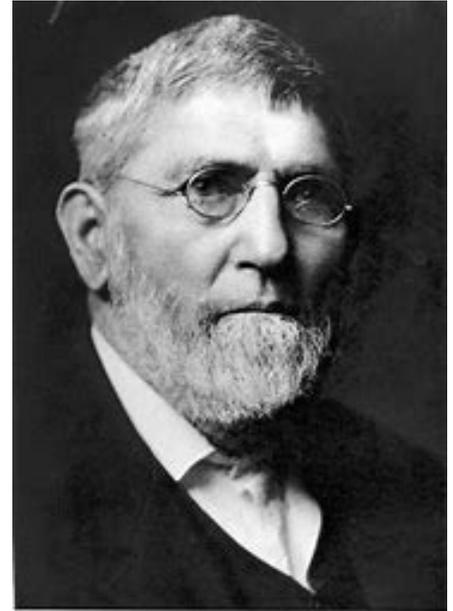
I grew up singing hymns. The hymns that fed my spiritual longing can still raise the hair on my neck when they are sung well. To hear a group sing, "*Holy, holy holy is the Lord God almighty*" can and will make me wonder if the ground I am standing upon is holy. To hear *Blessed Assurance* and to sing the chorus, "*This is my story, this is my song*"--you will not often hear me sing these words without passion.

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COVID-19

When I first heard about COVID-19, I didn't give the virus too much attention. After all, the virus was affecting a geographical region that was literally thousands of miles away. But as the weeks passed by it became apparent that our lives would be tremendously affected by COVID-19. Schools have been canceled for three weeks. Friends have become unemployed. Grocery store shelves are emptied. Family members are placed in self-isolation due to work travels and even trips of family members have been canceled, and my retirement savings have taken a significant loss.

The response, at least in our context is one of fear and scarcity. We are fearful of the other. We are becoming hoarders: we hoard food and disinfectant supplies. Is there another way to respond? Is there a story we can tell that will help us change our imaginations? Is there a text of Scripture that will shape us to respond, not with fear and scarcity, but with gospel impulses?



David Lipscomb, 1831-1917

In 1873, a Cholera epidemic struck the city of Nashville. Over 500 people died in the month of June alone. Anyone with the means of wealth left the city, leaving the most vulnerable to suffer and die. Often this meant the impoverished African American community.

David Lipscomb, a wealthy, white landowner, instead of leaving the city of Nashville worked his way into the affected areas of the city and attended to the needs of the sick and dying. Lipscomb would write in June 1873, in the journal called *Gospel Advocate*, "*It is a time that should call out the full courage and energy of the church in looking after the needy . . . Every individual, black or white, that dies from neglect and want of proper food and nursing, is a reproach to the professors of the Christian religion in the vicinity of Nashville.*"

Don't misunderstand me, it's vitally important we listen and follow the guidance of trained medical personnel who are leading our societies to deal with COVID-19. One of the ways we need to listen is to practice social isolation (at least in our context). Yet, while we practice social isolation, we cannot forget about our neighbour. We cannot forget about living out the command of Jesus: love God and love your neighbour. Thus, in what ways does the story of David Lipscomb help us develop a gospel-shaped imagination as we live with COVID-19? In what ways are we able to respond, not with fear and scarcity, but with gospel impulses shaped by the life of Jesus?

The Spirit of God, cont'd

The Christian community of faith I serve, at one point in time, loved singing. We knew the hymns that sustained our ancestors because they were the same hymns that have sustained our lives. But something has changed. It seems we do not know the ancient hymns anymore. The reason is not because we have forgotten to sing the hymns; the reason is that many in the congregation did not grow up with the songs of faith. Many of our individuals/families that worship with us have not grown up in a church and therefore the songs have not had a chance to become a part of their lives.

On this one particular Sunday the song leader asked us to sing the song entitled *Spirit of the Living God*. When the first words were sung I started to cringe, shake, and to become fearful. Not because we were singing out of tune and sounded like nails being dragged down a chalkboard; I actually thought we sounded really good. I began to shake with fear because I wondered what would happen if these words actually came true.

Spirit of the Living God, fall fresh on me.
Spirit of the living God, fall fresh on me.
Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me.
Spirit of the living God, fall fresh on me.

Do we really want the Spirit of God to fall on us? Do we? Do we want to be Spirit empowered people? After all, it doesn't take long to read through the stories of the early church and discover the Spirit of God powerfully at work within the life of God's people. On the day of Pentecost the Spirit of God was given to both men and women who were gathered in prayer. These men and women were then sent out to every nation to proclaim God's in-breaking kingdom. It was the Spirit that helped Paul and his companions change their travel plans. It was the Spirit that helped Jewish Christians change their table manners and wrestle with the newness of God. The Galatian church discovered the Spirit of God at work in their midst to tear down the dividing walls between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female. Imagine being a slave owner and discovering that your slave is now your brother. The Corinthian church discovered that both male and female were given the gift of the Spirit and as a result, there were, among many gifted people, female prophets (let's not forget female prophets speaking in worship services--1 Cor. 11-14).

Author Leonard Allen writes in his most recent book entitled, *Poured Out*, how the witness of the New Testament shows two prominent features of the Spirit. First, the Spirit's central role in the in-breaking of God's promise concerning God's newness. The Spirit of God is at work to usher in God's future. Second, the Spirit's work of creating community among the people of God: a community enjoying the mutuality and giftedness of the "fellowship of the Spirit."^[1]

If we are able to take the witness of Scripture and see what the Spirit of God is doing (and will continue to do), then you might see why I am hesitant to sing "*Spirit of the Living God, fall fresh on me.*" Do I really want to see the Spirit of God be poured out? If the Spirit of God is poured out, I should not be surprised to discover

[1] Leonard Allen, *Poured Out* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2018), 21.

the Spirit of God at work in ways that will usher in God's future nor should I be surprised to find the Spirit of God creating community that enjoys the gifts of the Spirit being poured out upon the entire community--not just a select few people.

With this, I seem to be asking some questions:

1. In what ways is God's Spirit ushering in God's new heaven and earth (Rev 21:1)?
2. Who is the Spirit of God calling me (us) to live into community with?
3. What kind of gifts do I see God giving to people and how might these gifts be used for the building up of the body of Christ?

Of course, the answers to these questions are context specific. In our context, we have discerned over the years how God is calling us to live into relationships with a specific neighbourhood, organizations and people. As we have lived into these relationships, we have discovered the Spirit of God creating community, and through this, have discovered a variety of people using their gifts to build up the body of Christ. Not only is God creating community in our midst, we are seeing (albeit dimly) God's new heaven and earth: we are seeing people with addictions find healing, the ostracized are given a place of welcome, we are working towards food equality where everyone has a place at the Table, we see reconciliation and forgiveness.

Seeing God's new heaven and earth breaking into our midst has led us to the vision of a Parish House. Our vision is leading us to call a family to live in the neighbourhood and to build upon the on-going redemptive work of God that is already taking place.

The song leader invited us to sing *Spirit of the living God fall fresh on me*. I heard these words and I became fearful but I also became hopeful. I am filled with hope that God's Spirit is still at work in our midst making all things new.

Thinking Through COVID-19

Randy Harris. On March 25, Randy Harris spoke about the incarnate God during COVID-19. Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rgZyx6bISiA>

Nathan Pickard. Nathan produced two short videos to help his community of faith remain rooted in the life of God during COVID-19. [New Creation in the Midst of COVID-19](#) and [Remember](#).

"To be most effective in bringing about change in a community or a neighborhood, it helps if you live there."

Larry James, *The Wealth of the poor*

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