

Asking the Pastor

The Indwelling Holy Spirit

Recently, Pastor Lance, you answered a question about the nature of the indwelling ministry of the Holy Spirit. You were asked specifically about whether the Holy Spirit indwells individual Christians, or is His indwelling ministry to be better understood as a corporate indwelling? Could you clarify?

When I answered that very question a few weeks ago in a public Q & A session, I began by saying that I believe Scripture teaches both individual and corporate indwelling by the Holy Spirit. In other words, the Spirit's indwelling ministry is not a matter of either/or but rather a both/and with regard to both the individual Christian and the corporate body of Christ. In order to answer this important question more fully though, I will ask and then answer several other questions which I have been asked regarding the precise nature of the Spirit's indwelling ministry in both of these ways:

Question: In what manner does the Holy Spirit indwell believers anyway?

This is a good question. In order to clear up unnecessary confusion and needless speculation, it is important to first understand that the exact and precise nature of the ministry of the Spirit's indwelling is mysterious. The Bible does not so spell out the clear and unmistakable aspects of our being indwelt by the Spirit that we are not left with additional areas to ponder. However, as Sinclair Ferguson has written about this mysterious nature of the indwelling ministry of the Holy Spirit: "*The relationship [between believers and the Holy Spirit] is more intimate than that of a mere divine influence, but the exact character of the Spirit's indwelling is nowhere explained or explored. In the nature of the case it parallels the mysteries of the divine-human engagement in providence, inspiration and incarnation*" (The Holy Spirit, in the *Contours of Christian Theology* series, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996, p. 176, *my emphasis*). We must always be careful not to press scripturally taught spiritual realities into physical/spatial categories of the human dimension. It is often a mysterious thing to try and understand the interplay between the spiritual and the human/physical. With very little biblical insight as it relates to the precise nature and extent of this indwelling ministry of the Spirit, we must, however, affirm its factual biblical basis, even if we are not able to pinpoint the kind of accuracy we would otherwise desire to know.

Question: Is the Holy Spirit "in," that is "inside" believers? Please explain.

Because of what I have just mentioned, it is difficult to answer this question, because by the way the question is actually framed, if a person answers "no," it prejudices the dialog before an adequate answer can be satisfactorily given. Let me show you what I mean. Since the Holy Spirit is a spiritual being and, therefore, has no physical form, He cannot properly be said to be "inside" a person in the physical/spatial sense. If,

however, someone is wondering about whether or not the Holy Spirit “*abides,*” “*indwells,*” or “*inhabits*” believers in a “spiritual” but *no less real sense*, then yes, of course, the Holy Spirit can be rightfully said to be “*inside*” all true believers. Since the Holy Spirit is God—and because God Himself is by nature omnipresent—He could be said to be “*in*” everything, including being “*inside*” believers (see for example Psalm 139:7-12). But again, we must be careful not to press too far these spiritual and physical/spatial categories in relation to one another. For instance, we must not press the issue to the point that God is literally “*in*” everything when referring to the physical/spatial dimension, because if you do, you could very easily slip into the heresy of *pantheism*. In addition, just because the concept of the Holy Spirit as a spirit being is true and can’t, therefore, be forced into physical/spatial categories does not, however, mean He is unable to do all things “for us” or “to us” as believers, or even be “*in (inside)* us” spiritually speaking. This includes instructing us in/with our minds/hearts to first understand His truth and then to effect change and growth in our holiness as a result. The Holy Spirit convicts us when we sin; He illumines us to understand Scripture; He comforts us in time of difficulty; He intercedes for us in our weakened prayer condition; etc. All true believers share a wonderful, intimate relationship with the precious Holy Spirit who brings us to a deeper, richer knowledge of God’s Word and will. In none of these aforementioned important areas of His ministry does the Bible teach that the Holy Spirit can *only* do so by physically, spatially inhabiting our brains. It is simply not necessary (and potentially dangerous) to use such language when speaking of the Spirit’s ministry to believers, nor is it helpful since Scripture does not give us the *precise nature* of the Spirit’s ministry of indwelling. Because the Holy Spirit is God and, therefore, the creator of the physical universe, He is perfectly capable of transcending the *physical, spatial dimension in order to bring about all His spiritual ends with regard to the believer’s life*.

Question: But what about those New Testament passages which seem to speak of the Holy Spirit’s spatial inhabitation of the believer by using the little preposition “*in,*” as in Romans 8:9—“The Spirit of God dwells *in* you?”

We must again be careful not to press spiritual realities into physical/spatial categories. For instance, when referring to all true believers the apostle Paul is fond of using the phrase, “*in Christ.*” Likewise, he speaks of Christ’s corporate, spiritual body as having “Christ in you.” Does Paul mean that we are somehow literally “*in*” (*inside*) of Christ, and that Christ Himself is somehow literally “*in*” (*inside*) of us? No. In speaking of our relationship with Christ, He is “*in*” us in the sense that He died for us (justification) and continues to guide us in knowing Him more intimately (sanctification). This guidance comes not from a mystical experience of Christ’s literal inhabitation of us, but from His illumining our understanding of Scripture and His guidance of us in that truth. This spiritual reality brings the individual believer (as well as the corporate body) no less a dynamic, intimate relationship with Christ. The same is true of the individual believer’s relationship with the Holy Spirit. He is “*in*” us (*indwells us*) in the spiritual sense that He comforts and guides our hearts into greater intimacy with Christ. He opens our minds in order to understand and apply God’s Word, so that each day we might be more pleasing to God the Father. He does so much more “*in*” us spiritually than space

simply does not allow me to enumerate. Suffice it to say the Holy Spirit indwells us as the New Testament clearly affirms.

Before I go on to the next question, however, I do need to make one other point regarding the “*in*” language of the New Testament. The Greek word (*en*), which is often translated by our English word “in” can actually be translated (among other options and depending on the context) “in” “with” or “by.” When translators chose the English word “*in*,” they could also have chosen the English preposition “*with*,” which would mean that the Holy Spirit is “*with*” believers instead of being “*in*” believers. There is no substantive difference between these two ideas. This could also possibly help clear up confusion as it relates to the “location” of the Holy Spirit’s indwelling ministry within us. This is precisely why I contend that the New Testament writers are not implying that the Holy Spirit is “*inside*” believers when they choose the Greek word *en*. Their point in using this particular preposition is to emphasize the Holy Spirit’s **power** and **presence**, not to signal His **location**. That the main issue is (and should always be) the Spirit’s power and presence and not His spatial location, should not be problematic to the Christian’s understanding and comfort.

Question: Is the “indwelling” of the Holy Spirit in believers said to be the same as the “filling” of the Holy Spirit?

No. These are two different and distinct ministries of the Spirit’s work. The concept of the Spirit’s indwelling is something all believers experience fully and completely at the time of their conversion. That is, they are placed into the body of Christ—by His agency—through the instrumentality of the Holy Spirit. Christ is the one who baptizes all believers into His spiritual body through the Spirit’s work of regeneration. 1 Corinthians 12:13 speaks of this *one baptism* which places all believers into Christ’s spiritual body (see also Ephesians 4:5). Regarding 1 Corinthians 12:13, theologian Donald Guthrie writes: “. . . The [Spirit’s] baptism has as its aim incorporation into the body, which implies that no-one can be in the body without the operation of the Spirit. . . . [Paul’s] statement that ‘all’ were made to drink of one Spirit shows the basic solidarity of all Christians in the Spirit” (New Testament Theology, Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981, p. 563).

The Holy Spirit’s work in “filling” believers is a distinctly different ministry than is His indwelling. When the apostle Paul commands the Ephesians to be “filled with the Holy Spirit” (Ephesians 5:18), he is not referring to the Spirit’s work at conversion/initiation into Christ’s spiritual body, but a continual ministry of controlling or influencing the everyday life of believers. Because this is a command to be obeyed, it should immediately be seen as distinct from what Christ is doing by the Spirit to place men and women into His body. As a command, this “fullness” should be viewed as a continual pursuit of allowing the Holy Spirit to control or influence believers, just as wine, when continually pursued, controls or influences a person. Again, Donald Guthrie writes: “The first [reason to see the baptism with the Spirit as distinct from the filling of the Spirit] is that Paul uses the present continuous tense (keep on being filled), which excludes all thought of a once-for-all spiritual experience [Spirit baptism]. The second is

that the idea of ‘fullness’ implies degrees of spiritual experience, according to the extent to which the believer is yielded to the direction of the Spirit” (*New Testament Theology*, p. 564). We could say that the Spirit’s ministry of indwelling occurs for everyone the very moment they are baptized into Christ (at least experientially and from the human perspective), and the filling of the Spirit occurs as a moment-by-moment reality throughout the Christian’s life.

It should also be noted that the English term “filling” could be seen as somewhat misleading in Ephesians 5:18. The term could be construed as meaning that believers need a “*filling up*” of the Holy Spirit, as though the Spirit of God could be poured into us by some steady, quantitative amount. Paul’s command to these Ephesians, however, is rather that believers are to continually and progressively allow the Holy Spirit to *influence* the overall quality of their lives. The issue at hand is not one of the Spirit’s “*filling*” as much as it is His “influence” of us. It is not, “*How much do believers have of the Holy Spirit?*” but instead, “*How much does the Holy Spirit have of believers?*”

Question: Does the Holy Spirit indwell all believers individually, or is His indwelling ministry to be seen as primarily corporate, encompassing more the idea of His indwelling of the collective body of Christ?

This is the heart of the question I was asked recently (you may also download and listen to my answer under the “online sermons” section of our website—“Questions and Answers,” dated 1-29-06; and for a much more complete written perspective on the subject of the Spirit’s corporate indwelling of believers, please read Dr. George Zemek, “*Metaphorical Continuities: A Case for the Primacy of Corporate Indwelling*,” a paper presented at the national meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, November 17th, 2000, Nashville, TN. The paper can be accessed in PDF format from the *Q and A Session* link, found on the BCLR Website Homepage. While every genuine believer is a *bona fide* member of the body of Christ and is therefore a recipient of the Spirit’s personal indwelling ministry, many people have—by focusing on the individual believer’s indwelling—thus neglected the abundant New Testament teaching that the Holy Spirit also corporately indwells the Body of Christ. In fact, a majority of the passages of Scripture that deal with the indwelling ministry of the Spirit and that have been interpreted as applying only to the individual would be better interpreted as applying to the corporate indwelling of the Spirit in the Body of Christ. This in no way negates the fact of the individual believer himself being indwelt by the Spirit. It simply tries to affirm what these texts are actually saying about the Spirit’s indwelling of all believers corporately. And it is also to affirm that because any individual member is a part of the overall body, we must affirm both realities without dismissing either one out of hand.

The corporate concept of the Spirit’s indwelling is indeed what the New Testament itself primarily (but certainly not exclusively) emphasizes. David J. Williams, an Australian New Testament scholar, thus could write: “In popular belief, if God could be found anywhere, it was in the *naos*, the sanctuary. **But Paul implies that the church is now the sanctuary of God and that it is here, in the church (i.e., through the gospel**

preached and practiced by the church), that God can be found (David J. Williams, *Paul's Metaphors: Their Context and Character*, Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999, p. 245, *my emphasis*). Williams goes on to say, in a footnote to this same section, further emphasizing the corporate concept of the Spirit's indwelling of the church: "Cf. 1 Cor 3:16, 17, 'You [***plural, referring to the church***] are God's [*naos*--Temple]'; 2 Cor 6:16, 'we [the church] are the *naos* of God' (p. 251, *his emphasis*). What Williams—and other New Testament exegetes—are saying about certain metaphors and terms is that the body of Christ being the "temple," the "bride," the "elect," the "redeemed," etc. primarily refers to the *corporate dimension of that body rather than a primary emphasis on individuals within that body*. That is not to say there aren't definite *implications* for the individual believer, but the *primary* reference to these terms and metaphors is this corporate dimension. That is precisely why the apostle Paul uses the metaphor of the temple when he says of the corporate body of believers in Ephesus: "In whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you [the corporate body of believers in Ephesus] also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit" (Ephesians 2:21-22). This is unmistakably emphasizing the corporate dimension of their common life together. And if, for instance, you trace the "temple" metaphor throughout its New Testament usages (again, please refer to Dr. George Zemek's "*Metaphorical Continuities*" ETS paper for these New Testament references and their subsequent exegesis), you will find that this corporate dimension is key. In his presentation, Dr. Zemek wisely warns: ". . . The *importance* of the reality of indwelling for the individual is not denied. However, individual members of the Body enjoy and benefit from God's presence *as members of the Body of Christ in which the Holy Spirit dwells*. The individual stones of God's spiritual house are likewise blessed *as stones belonging to that holy edifice in which the Spirit has taken up residence*. The focus of such metaphors is corporate. Their significance relates primarily to the whole and secondarily to the parts, but only as individual parts *of that whole* (p. 5, his emphases).

Question: Frankly, what is the real relevance of all this emphasis on the corporate indwelling of the Holy Spirit anyway? Shouldn't my own personal sense of the Holy Spirit's indwelling be my main focus?

This final question needs to be asked because it exposes something about the current state of evangelicalism in the West. Christians from the West struggle to understand this aspect of the corporate nature of the body of Christ, especially how it is to be lived out in local church contexts. The Bible's emphasis on our being "members of one another" (see Romans 12:5; 1 Corinthians 12:27, for instance) carries with it huge implications for our collective life together, to say nothing of our individual actions as Christians and how those actions affect one another in our local, corporate bodies. The relevance for our crucial understanding of our responsibility toward the greater body is immense.

This whole issue of the West's penchant for *individualism* has now come into an acute and alarming focus for the Church of Jesus Christ in the 21st Century. Two men, George Barna, and Harold Camping, even though coming from very different mindsets

and backgrounds, have both recently advocated that individuals should leave their local churches in order to experience their own self-styled forms of worship.

Harold Camping, the president of Family Radio, a ministry operating primarily out of the San Francisco, California, area but which has a whole host of radio outlets all across the United States and abroad, is now advocating that all genuine Christians should leave their local churches, a teaching which has caused no small confusion for many local congregations across America. He writes:

“In its intense study of the Bible, Family Radio has discovered that a great amount of Biblical evidence points to the all-important fact that the world has come very close to its end. It has also discovered from carefully studying the Bible that, in a sense, this end of the world judgment has already begun, because judgment must begin with the house of God (1 Peter 4:17, Hebrews 10:30).

“Therefore, now that we have learned from the Bible that God’s judgment is upon the house of God, which are the local congregations, we are now compelled to teach the Biblical truth that *God has shifted the final task of world evangelism to individual Christians who are outside of a local congregation. In obedience to these Biblical teachings, Family Radio, which is completely outside of any church institution, and which is supported and administered by individual believers, does teach that today, as we are heading for the end of this world’s existence, we should not be a part of a local church*” (Harold Camping, Time Has an End, New York: Vantage Press, 2005, p. 496, *my emphasis*).

Were it not for the startling impact of Camping’s writings and call-in radio program, we could easily write off this bizarre, zany and *unBiblical* approach to interpretation and exegesis which Family Radio proclaims. He wrongly predicted the end of the world in 1994, and now suggests in his latest book that the “probable” year is now 2011. However, Harold Camping’s errant and unsubstantiated views are being readily and greedily swallowed by hundreds and hundreds of people who are indeed leaving their local churches and sitting by their radios for the next steps.

This is exactly why the New Testament’s teachings about the corporate dimension of the body of Christ are essential! To advocate the departure of professing believers from the fellowship and security of their local churches is one of the most profound errors in the Church today. We must—as never before—emphasize the protection and accountability of our corporate lives together in the context of biblically accurate local churches which are designed by God to be the pillar and buttress of truth (1 Timothy 3:15). Regarding this very verse and the serious error of Harold Camping’s views about believers leaving their local churches, James White writes:

“It hardly needs to be mentioned that nothing is said [in 1 Timothy 3:15] about a time when the Holy Spirit would abandon His very dwelling

place [notice the corporate dimension], a time when believers would no longer be added to the church or that God would Himself destroy it. Given the stability of the foundation, the immovability of the cornerstone, and the wisdom and power of the architect, the idea of the building collapsing on it own is simply ridiculous, so without the explicit statement that God Himself would destroy His own building, passages such as these leave us no reason to believe such a teaching [as Harold Camping's]" (James R. White, Dangerous Airwaves: Harold Camping Refuted and Christ's Church Defended, Amityville, New York: Calvary Press, 2002, p. 25. See also the excellent critique of Camping's views by Ligon Duncan and Mark Talbot, Should We Leave Our Churches?: A Biblical Response to Harold Camping, Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 2004, 59 p.).

A second and very popular, influential Christian pollster and researcher, George Barna writes the following incredible statements in his newest book, Revolution (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2005):

“Being in a right relationship with God and His people is what matters [in being a spiritual revolutionary]. Scripture teaches us that devoting your life to loving God with all your heart, mind, strength, and soul is what honors Him. Being part of the local church may facilitate that. Or it might not. Sadly, many people will label this view ‘blasphemy.’ However, you should realize that *the Bible neither describes nor promotes the local church as we know it today*. . . . We should keep in mind that what we call ‘church’ is just one interpretation of how to develop and live a faith-centered life. We made it up. It may be healthy or helpful, but it is not sacrosanct. . . . [In this so-called new spiritual revolution] We expect to see believers choosing from a proliferation of [different ‘church’] options, weaving together a set of favored alternatives into a unique tapestry that constitutes the personal ‘church’ of the individual. . . . Theirs [a revolutionary’s self-styled pursuit of Christ outside the local church] is a personal choice based on a genuine desire to be holy and obedient, but finding that need better served outside the framework of congregational structures. . . . When the Bible admonishes us to gather together, it does not imply that that should be a church service or congregational event. . . . There is no verse in Scripture that links the concepts of worshipping God and a ‘church meeting.’ The Bible does not tell us that worship must happen in a church sanctuary and therefore we must be actively associated with a local church. . . . No informed Christian leader could make a straight-faced argument that involvement in a local church necessarily produces a more robust spiritual life than that seen among Revolutionaries. . . . Christians who are involved in local churches are actually less likely than Revolutionaries to lead a biblical lifestyle. . . . It is inappropriate to suggest that Revolutionaries are worse off because they do not receive teaching from a nearby congregation. In fact, we have

learned [through the Barna group of researchers] that many Revolutionaries rely upon Bible teaching delivered through Christian media or via teaching of trusted Bible expositors whose recordings they subscribe to. . . . Our research shows that local churches have virtually no influence in our culture. . . . The local church appears among entities that have little or no influence on society. It seems that if Revolutionaries approach faith from a different angle, the [universal] Church has little to lose and much to gain [by these Revolutionaries leaving their local churches]" (pp. 37, 38, 66, 113, 114, 115, 117, 118).

Barna's analysis and prescription for individual believers is both spiritually dangerous and biblically frightening! Bruce Milne surely is a corrective to someone like Barna when he writes:

"The Christian life is inescapably corporate. Teaching on Christian holiness has frequently concentrated almost exclusively on the 'holy man' or the 'holy woman', to the neglect of the biblical concern for the 'holy people' or the 'holy church'. The ideal of the 'omnicompetent Christian individual', able to meet every spiritual challenge and live a life of unbroken victory over sin and the devil, has undoubtedly produced remarkable examples of Christian character; but, as every Christian counselor knows, this emphasis has driven many to a lonely struggle ending in despair and disillusionment, or worse, in the hypocrisy of a double-standard life.

*"This whole approach needs re-examination. The bulk of NT teaching on the Christian life, including the major sections on holiness, occur in letters addressed to corporate groups, to churches. All the major exhortations to holy living are plural—'we', 'you' (Rom. 6:1-23; Gal. 5:13—6:10; Eph. 4:17—6:18)—including exhortations to 'put on the full armor of God' (Eph. 6:11-18; Col. 3:1-17; 1 Thess. 4:1-12; 1 Pet. 1:13—2:12; cf. Mt. 5—7). Similarly, all the NT promises of victory are corporate (1 Cor. 15:57; 1 Jn. 5:4; Rev. 15:2). In other words, the apostles envisaged the Christian life and Christian sanctification in the context of a loving, caring fellowship. Individual weaknesses, character defects, personality problems, which we all have, are complemented, supported, healed and compensated for by the other members of the body of Christ. This must not be misunderstood, for God **does** deal with us directly as individuals: **each** Christian is summoned to costly, personal repentance from sin, and to the highest standards of holiness. This recognition of the corporate aspect is no road to moral compromise; rather, it is a road to Christian sanity, realism and wholeness" (Bruce Milne, Know the Truth: A Handbook of Christian Belief, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998, revised edition, pp. 242-243).*

Likewise, Don Carson has recently written: “In the West, we often focus so much of our attention on the individual that we tend to overlook the corporate body.” He later writes: “Christians cannot think of their salvation in exclusively legal or *individualistic* terms. We constitute a new humanity, the humanity of the last times, for by the cross God put to death the hostility that engulfed us ([Ephesians] 2:16). To be satisfied with anything less than this high vision is to betray the gospel” (D. A. Carson, Love in Hard Places, Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2002, pp. 84, 105, *my emphasis*).

These two glaring examples of Camping and Barna advocating the departure of individuals from their local churches are precisely why this matter of the Holy Spirit’s indwelling of the Church should remain as of utmost importance. Those individual genuine believers who are seduced by self-appointed “teachers” and supposed “spokesmen” for Christianity, who themselves are neither called nor sent by any recognized, ordained Eldership, will be asked to leave their local churches to their own hurt. It will be because they have been—among other important New Testament teachings—discouraged to live out the implications and applications of all the great metaphors which describe our collective lives as the body of Christ which is then beautifully manifested within the local assembly. It is equally and sadly true that if the corporate dimension of the Spirit’s indwelling is not taught and emphasized, would-be, self-styled worshippers wrongly assume they have an individualized inhabitation of the Holy Spirit, with which they can simply forsake the local assembly without so much as a single negative consequence. They do so, however, at their own ruin.