A SAMPLE CHAPTER

Feathers and All

A Confessional Lutheran Word to Charismatics, and to the Churches That Envy Them

By **Larry Herzog Jr.**
larryherzogjr.com

CHAPTER ONE

The Hunger

NOT A DOCTRINE

There is a way of believing in the Holy Spirit that never quite gets around to Him.

You can learn it in confirmation class. The Spirit is the third person of the Trinity. He proceeds from the Father and the Son. He is of one substance with them, coeternal and coequal. All of that is true, and I would not change a word of it. But it is possible to say all of it the way you would recite the parts of a carburetor, as information about a machine you have never driven. You can confess the Holy Spirit every Sunday in the creed and still live as though He were a footnote to the real business of religion, which is knowing the right answers and showing up on time.

The charismatic movement, whatever else it is, is a protest against that. Its people have read the New Testament and noticed that the Spirit there is not a footnote. He is the Lord who hovered over the waters at creation, who came upon prophets and kings, who overshadowed a virgin in Nazareth, who descended on Jesus at the Jordan and drove Him into the wilderness. He is the one who fell on the disciples at Pentecost with wind and fire and turned frightened fishermen into preachers. He opens hearts, convicts the world, intercedes with groans too deep for words, and raises the dead. The Spirit of the New Testament *does* things.

So when a charismatic tells you that the Holy Spirit is not a doctrine but a person, that He is near, that He acts, that He can be known, I want you to hear something before you hear anything else from me. He is right.

The Nicene Creed calls the Spirit "the Lord and giver of life." That is not the description of a concept. It is the description of the living God at work. A church that confesses those words and then expects nothing to happen has not kept the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. It has embalmed it.

This chapter is about the hunger that drives the charismatic movement. I want to spend the whole of it conceding what is true, because I do not think anyone has the right to correct the movement until he has first understood why so many good people joined it. The question of this book is not whether to hunger for God. It is where the bread is. But we cannot get to that question honestly until we admit that the hunger is real, and that churches like mine have often left people starving.

WHERE NOTHING HAPPENED

Ask people who joined a charismatic church where they came from, and you will hear a lot of the same story. They grew up somewhere respectable. The building was beautiful. The hymns were sung, more or less. The sermon was twelve minutes long and could have been preached in any decade of the last century without changing a word, because it was not really addressed to anyone. It was a lecture about God, or a moral talk about being nicer, or a commentary on the news. Nobody in the pews expected God to say anything, and nobody went home thinking He had.

They will tell you that communion came around once a quarter, or once a month if the pastor was ambitious, and that it felt more like a memorial service than a meal. They will tell you nobody ever prayed for them by name. They will tell you that when their marriage was falling apart or their son was arrested, the church sent a casserole and a card, and the card did not mention Jesus.

Then a friend brought them to a different kind of service. People raised their hands. Someone laid hands on them and prayed out loud, in the present tense, as if God were standing right there and might actually do something. A stranger said she felt the Lord wanted them to know they were not forgotten. They wept. For the first time in years, maybe for the first time ever, church felt like it had something to do with God.

I am not going to tell those people they imagined it. And I am not going to pretend the church they left had nothing to answer for.

I said in the introduction that the Law in this book would fall on my side of the aisle too. Here it is.

If you belong to a church that confesses the means of grace, a church that says the Spirit comes through the preached Word and the Sacraments, then you have made a very large promise to your people. You have told them that when the Gospel is preached, God Himself is speaking. You have told them that Baptism is not a symbol but a washing of rebirth. You have told them that in the Supper they receive the true body and blood of Christ for the forgiveness of their sins. If those things are true, then a Lutheran Sunday is the most Spirit-filled hour in the week.

But a church that confesses all of that and then preaches sermons without Christ in them, offers the Supper so rarely that people forget it exists, rushes the absolution like a formality, and recites the liturgy in a tone that says nothing here is really happening, has done something worse than a church that never made the promise. It has told

people where God has promised to be and then acted as if He were not there. Of course people went looking elsewhere. We taught them the address and then left the lights off.

The charismatic movement grew, in part, in the space where the sacramental churches went quiet. That is not an excuse for its errors. It is a confession of ours.

THE HUNGER IS RIGHT

"As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul longs after You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, the living God. When shall I come and appear in God's presence?" (Psalm 42:1-2).[1]

That is not the prayer of a man who wants information about God. It is the prayer of a man who wants God. He is not thirsty for a better theology of water. He is thirsty.

The psalmist is far from the temple when he writes it. He remembers leading the festival crowd to the house of God with shouts of joy, and now he is somewhere on the edge of the land, with enemies asking him every day, "Where is your God?" (42:3). His hunger is not for a feeling. It is for presence, for the place where God had promised to meet His people. That detail will matter later. For now, notice only that Scripture does not scold him for wanting God near. It gives his longing words and puts them in the mouth of the whole congregation.

The charismatic hunger is that same longing. Strip away the vocabulary, the stage lighting, the rehearsed spontaneity that sometimes creeps into the worship set, and what you find underneath is a soul that thirsts for the living God. It wants Him near. It wants to know He hears. It wants evidence that the Christian life is something more than good manners and correct answers.

I want to say clearly that this hunger is not the problem. Some critics of the movement treat any desire to experience God as suspect, as though the mature Christian should be content with propositions and should regard longing as a sign of weakness. That is not Lutheran, and it is certainly not biblical. Luther himself was a man of enormous feeling. He wept, raged, laughed, despaired, and sang. His hymns are full of terror and joy. He did not tell people to stop longing for God. He told them where God had promised to satisfy that longing.

The hunger is also not a modern invention or an American peculiarity. It is as old as Psalm 42 and as recent as the last person who sat in a pew and wondered whether God

1. Scripture quotations are from the Berean Standard Bible (BSB).

knew her name. A church that cannot speak to that hunger has nothing to say. A church that mocks it has forgotten the psalms.

So the question is not whether to hunger. The question is where the bread is.

WHERE THE BREAD IS

John 6 begins with a miracle and ends with a sermon, and the crowd likes the miracle a great deal better.

Jesus feeds five thousand men with five barley loaves and two fish. The people are so impressed that they want to take Him by force and make Him king. He withdraws. The next day they track Him down on the other side of the sea, and He tells them plainly why they came: not because they understood the sign, but because they ate their fill of the loaves (John 6:26). They want more of what they felt the day before. They want the next miracle.

They even ask for it by name. Moses gave our fathers manna in the wilderness, they say. What sign will You do, so that we may see it and believe You? (6:30-31). It is a remarkably modern request. Do it again. Show us something. Then we will believe.

Jesus does not give them another sign. He gives them Himself, in words. "I am the bread of life," He says. "Whoever comes to Me will never hunger, and whoever believes in Me will never thirst" (6:35). The hunger they brought with them is real, and He does not deny it. He relocates it. The bread is not the next miracle. The bread is Christ, and Christ comes to them in His word.

The crowd thins out as the sermon goes on. By the end, many of His disciples are grumbling that this is a hard teaching. And Jesus says something that ought to be written over the door of every church that wants the Spirit: "The Spirit gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life" (6:63).

Read that slowly. Where is the Spirit who gives life? Jesus does not point to the loaves, though the loaves were a real miracle. He does not point to the crowd's excitement, though it was real excitement. He points to His words. *The words I have spoken to you are spirit.* The Spirit is not a mood in the room that the words help produce. The Spirit is in the words. That is where He has chosen to be.

Many turned back that day. Jesus asked the Twelve whether they wanted to leave too, and Peter answered for every hungry soul who has ever stayed: "Lord, to whom would we go? You have the words of eternal life" (6:68).

That is the whole argument of this book in one sentence from a fisherman. The hunger is right. The bread is real. And the bread comes in words.

HOW YOU RECEIVED HIM

The Galatian churches had experienced the Spirit. Paul does not deny it. He appeals to it. Something had happened among them that everyone could remember, and Paul does not call it imagination. He asks them how it happened.

"I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? After starting in the Spirit, are you now finishing in the flesh? Have you suffered so much for nothing, if it really was for nothing? Does God lavish His Spirit on you and work miracles among you because you practice the law, or because you hear and believe?" (Galatians 3:2-5).

Two things in this passage should comfort the charismatic reader, and one should give him pause.

The first comfort is that Paul assumes the Spirit is received, not merely believed in. The Galatians *received* Him. Something came to them from outside. The second comfort is that Paul is not embarrassed by miracles. He says plainly that God was working miracles among them. This is not a man who thinks the Spirit has gone quiet.

But notice where Paul locates all of it. The Spirit, and even the miracles, came by *hearing with faith*. Not by technique. Not by a higher spiritual attainment. Not by a second step that some Galatians took and others did not. They heard the message of Christ crucified, publicly portrayed before their eyes (3:1), and the Spirit came with the hearing. Their danger now is not that they lack the Spirit. Their danger is that they think they must add something to what they received, that having started by hearing they must now finish by achieving. Paul calls that foolish.

The pattern goes back to the first Christian sermon. When the crowd at Pentecost was cut to the heart and asked what they should do, Peter did not tell them to tarry, to seek, or to press in. He said: "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This promise belongs to you and your children and to all who are far off—to all whom the Lord our God will call to Himself" (Acts 2:38-39).

The gift of the Holy Spirit is attached to a promise, and the promise is attached to Baptism, and the promise is for *you*, and for your children, and for everyone the Lord

calls. It is not for a spiritual elite. It is not held in reserve for those who seek hard enough. It is given where God said He would give it.

We will come back to Acts 2 in Part Three and read it carefully alongside the other passages the movement relies on. For now it is enough to see that the first time anyone asked the apostles, in effect, "How do I get the Spirit?" the answer pointed outside the hearer, to a word and a washing.

I CANNOT, BUT HE HAS

Lutheran children learn a short explanation of the Third Article of the Creed in the Small Catechism. It begins with a confession that surprises people who think of Lutherans as cool and cerebral: "I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith."[2]

Read that as a charismatic might read it, and notice how much it agrees with him. It says the Holy Spirit is not a theory but an actor. He calls. He enlightens. He makes holy. He keeps. The verbs are all His. The Christian does not climb up to God by reason or effort; God the Spirit comes down and takes hold of him. If you want a Lutheran statement that the Spirit is alive and at work in every believer, here it is, taught to twelve-year-olds.

Now read it again and notice the small phrase in the middle: *through the gospel*. The Spirit has called me, but not out of nowhere. He called me through a message, a Word from outside me that I heard with my ears. The catechism goes on to say that He does this for the whole Christian church on earth, daily and richly forgiving sins, and that on the last day He will raise me and all the dead. The Spirit is enormously active in this confession. But He is active somewhere. He has an instrument, and it is the Gospel.

That phrase is the hinge of this whole book. The charismatic and the Lutheran agree on more of the Third Article than either usually admits. Both believe the Spirit is the living God. Both believe He acts. Both believe no one comes to Christ by his own strength. They part ways over where to look for Him. The movement, in many of its forms, teaches people to look for the Spirit in what they can feel, display, or report. The catechism teaches them to look for Him where He has bound Himself to speak.

2. Small Catechism, Creed, Third Article (Creed 6), in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000). Many readers will know the older wording, "I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him."

The difference matters most on the worst day of your life. When you cannot feel anything, when the prayer language has gone silent, when the healing did not come and the prophetic word turned out wrong, where do you look? If the Spirit's presence is measured by your experience, then on that day He is gone. If the Spirit has bound Himself to the Word preached to you and the water poured on you, then on that day He is exactly where He was on your best day. Your feelings have moved. He has not.

That is the bread. Not less Spirit, but a sure Spirit. Not a God you have to catch, but a God who has promised to be found, in places He has named.

The next three chapters tell the story of how the church has faced this question before, and how the modern movement came to be. I tell it not to win an argument with history but because it helps to know that the hungry have always been with us, and that every generation has been offered two kinds of bread: the kind you find inside yourself, and the kind God puts in your hand.

This is where the sample ends. The rest of Feathers and All is the invitation it opens onto.

Continue reading — get the book →