

Response to John Mark Hicks*

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John Mark Hicks's five-finger exercise, like the original five-finger exercise and the best of the subsequent versions, narrates the acts of God as they intersect human experience. In this case, Hicks narrates the activity of the Holy Spirit to unite believers. The Holy Spirit enables a believer to make a confession of faith that is shared by all other believers thus uniting them to others who share the same symbol. The Holy Spirit enables transformation by generating the fruit of the Spirit necessary for sustained unity with other believers. The Holy Spirit draws believers toward the sacred assembly and to the work of the people of God—liturgy--and enables a worship that though it is embodied in particular forms for particular contexts nonetheless transcends the differences generated by forms to participate in the grand chorus of all true worshipers who worship God in Spirit. The Holy Spirit binds believers together as they each manifest their Spirit-given gifts for interdependent ministry, participating in the kingdom of God, for the sake of the world and its salvation. Finally, the Holy Spirit cultivates a deepening perception of and sensitivity toward the Spirit's own work and the active presence of the Holy Spirit in other believers uniting them in a shared process of spiritual formation.

Hicks emphasizes that like the five fingers on a hand, though they can be differentiated from one another, they are meant to work together. They form a single unit or, to use my language, they tell a coherent story that is both a present and an eschatological reality.

The value of five-finger exercises is that they can introduce complex theology in accessible ways and at the same time provide

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pointers toward deeper reflection. I find that Hicks assessment does precisely that. As a local church pastor who frequently struggles to articulate an accessible theology of the Holy Spirit (pneumatology), I can well imagine utilizing this five finger exercise in adult courses introducing the Christian faith (we call our class “Christians First at First Christian” though I am sure others have equally catchy titles). It helps connect an understanding of the Holy Spirit to our tradition. It says how we understand the Spirit in positive terms rather than, as is so often the case, in negative terms—what we do NOT believe about the Holy Spirit instead of what we do believe.

I find this narrative deeply compelling and indeed worthy of deeper reflection. Hicks makes an early appeal to the Apostles' Creed (*Regula Fidei*). The Creed contains three “I believe” statements. The final “I believe” statement regards belief in the Holy Spirit. The clauses which follow the pneumatological affirmation—the holy catholic church, communion of the saints and the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body to everlasting life—can be understood as separate affirmations. However, they can also be understood as a narrative of the activity of the Holy Spirit just as the Creed's content following the christological affirmation is a narrative of Christ. With this possibility in view, I regard Hicks' five finger exercise as a faithful rendering of the part of the story spoken of as “the communion of saints.” The Holy Spirit is in the business of creating saints out of sinners and in a process of indwelling transformation unites believers together in unity.

The setting for the story Hicks narrates is the setting of the believer. The activity functions within the heart, mind, and spirit of each believer who—led by the Holy Spirit—is born into their own faith narrative through confession of Jesus as the Christ. I would only submit that while I believe this is a good and correct setting for understanding the work of the Holy Spirit that we also need to remember that the Holy Spirit is not an actor limited to only one setting at a time. The Holy Spirit also works and acts within the setting of the church—or in the language of the Creed, the holy catholic (essentially one) church.

As I briefly surveyed just a few of the writings where Disciples of Christ have made reference to the Holy Spirit, I am struck

by the way Disciples tend to set our narration of the Holy Spirit's activity within the setting of the church as a whole.

At our worst, we have tended to replace the Holy Spirit with the church. To cite one example that was cited in an earlier Stone-Campbell dialogue, "By becoming co-workers with the Father and the Son in the work of redemption, believers become one with one another."¹ I don't have this quotation in context so I don't know if it really suggests what I am implying. Another example, Short's introduction to Disciples theology for lay persons has a chapter on Christ followed by a chapter on God but no mention of the Holy Spirit. Nine of the thirteen chapters deal with some aspect of ecclesiology. We tend to equate discernment with discussion and majority rules as the closest we come to being led by the Spirit.

At our best, however, I think Disciples affirm the connection between the Holy Spirit and the community of faith. I'll cite just three examples:

1. *The Preamble to the Design* affirms belief in the Holy Spirit within the context of the community of faith, "In the communion of the Holy Spirit we are joined together in discipleship and in obedience to Christ."
2. *Theological Foundations and Policies and Criteria for the Ordering of Ministry in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)* Part I. Section A. "God calls all persons to receive the good news of the Gospel and accept their call to be God's people. In a divided and unbelieving world, those who accept this good news are drawn into the fellowship (*koinonia*) of a new community, the church. *In this body, the Holy Spirit unites those who follow Jesus Christ and sends them as witnesses into the world*" (emphasis added).

Later in I.D.2.a, "In Ordination—through prayers invoking the Holy Spirit and the laying on of hands—the Church confirms in women and men the call of God, acknowledges their gifts and graces, and authorizes this ministry in and for the Church."

3. In *The Church for Disciples of Christ: Seeking to be Truly Church Today*, Paul A. Crow and James O. Duke wrote, “The call that the church is to heed is a call from God—God’s self-communicating Word—in the history of Israel, in Jesus Christ, and in the birth of the church itself by the power of the Holy Spirit.”² They identify the “Community of the Holy Spirit” as one of the key images for the church in Disciples thought.

Admittedly, all three of these examples come from documents written explicitly to express some aspect of our ecclesiology. Even so, what begins to emerge in this is an affirmation that it is the community of faith in which and through which the Holy Spirit is experienced. This does not mean that the Holy Spirit cannot be experienced outside the fellowship of the church. It is only meant to suggest that we tend to see the Holy Spirit as animating or working within the Church—the community of faith.

The same five finger exercise that narrates the activity of the Holy Spirit in the believer can apply to the activity of the Holy Spirit in the church as a whole. The Holy Spirit enables the church to confess its faith in Jesus Christ through the witness of the Church to the saving acts of Christ which reaches its most authentic expression in the visible unity of the Church. The Holy Spirit cultivates a Christ-like character within the church as it acts and reacts more faithfully to its contexts and crises. The Holy Spirit enables the worship of the whole church in a variety of expressions and forms but directed to and received by one Lord. The Holy Spirit guides the church into ministries that embody God’s grace within a fragmented world. And the Holy Spirit will continue to work from within the church toward its exterior to cultivate a greater sensitivity to way the Spirit moves both in the present age and in the age to come.

Endnotes

¹ William Garrett West, *Barton Warren Stone: Early American Advocate of Christian Unity*, Nashville: The Disciples of Christ Historical Society, 1954, p.127, quoted in Robert Welsh, “Models of Unity: A Changing Landscape,” 2004 Stone Campbell Dialogue,

<http://www.disciples.org/ccu/programs/documents/2004welsh.html>;
LTQ 46 (1916): 110.

² *The Church for Disciples of Christ: Seeking to be Truly Church Today* (St. Louis: Christian Board of Publications, 1998), 37.



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