

The promise of the Spirit, the grand encouragement in promoting the Gospel: a circular letter to the churches of the Northamptonshire Baptist Association (June 1810)

Andrew Fuller, edited by Michael A. G. Haykin

Dear brethren,
In our last public letter, we addressed you on the work of the Holy Spirit.² In this we would direct your attention to the promise of the Spirit as the grand encouragement in promoting the spread of the gospel.

We take for granted that the spread of the gospel is the great object of your desire. Without this it will be hard to prove that you are Christian churches. An agreement in a few favourite opinions, or on one side of a disputed subject, or even a disagreement with others, will often induce men to form themselves into religious societies, and to expend much zeal and much property in accomplishing their objects. But this is not Christianity. We may be of what is called a sect, but we must not be of a sectarian spirit, seeking only the promotion of a party.

The true churches of Jesus Christ travail in birth for the salvation of men. They are the armies of the Lamb, the grand object of whose existence is to extend the Redeemer's kingdom.

About eighteen years ago God put it into the hearts of a number of your ministers and members to do something for his name among the heathen,³ the effect of which has been to give an impulse to those labours for the attainment of the same object in our several stations at home. The success which has followed is sufficient to induce us to press forward in the work, and to search after every direction and every consideration that may aid our progress.

The influence of the Holy Spirit is by some disowned, by others abused; and even those who are the subjects of it, from various causes, enjoy much less of it than might be expected.

Those who disown it apply all that is said in the Scriptures on the subject to the communication of miraculous and extraordinary gifts, as though the Lord had long since forsaken the earth, and men were now to be converted by the

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mere influence of moral suasion. It is on this principle that writers, according to the leaning which they have felt towards the opinions of this or that political party, have represented the work of converting the heathen as either extremely easy or absolutely impossible. It is not for us to acquiesce in either. But, while we despair of success from mere human efforts, to trust in him who, when sending forth his servants to teach all nations, promised to be with them to “the end of the world.”⁴

There are those, on the other hand, who abuse the doctrine, by converting it into an argument for sloth and avarice. God can convert sinners, say they, when he pleases, and without any exertions or contributions of ours. Yes, he can, and probably he will. Deliverance will arise from other quarters and they who continue in this spirit will be destroyed!

Even those in whom the Spirit of God is enjoyed much less of it⁵ than might be expected, and this principally for want of the things which were stated in our letter of last year, namely, setting a proper value upon it, seeking it with fervent prayer, placing an entire dependence upon it, and maintaining a deportment suitable to it. In proving, therefore, that the promise of the Holy Spirit is the grand encouragement in promoting the spread of the gospel, we have not merely to oppose the adversaries of the doctrine, but to instruct and impress the minds of its friends. With these ends in view, let us recommend to your consideration the following remarks.

First, the success of God’s cause under the Old Testament was considered by believers in those days as depending entirely upon God. God had a cause in the world from the earliest ages, and this it was which interested the hearts of his servants. It was for the setting up of his spiritual kingdom in the world that he blessed the seed of Abraham, and formed them into a people. This was the work that he carried on from generation to generation among them. When, therefore, sentence was passed on the people who came up out of Egypt,

that they should die in the wilderness, Moses, who seems on that occasion to have written the ninetyeth Psalm, was deeply concerned, lest, in addition to temporal judgements, the Lord should withdraw from them his Holy Spirit. “Let *thy work*,” said he, “appear unto thy servants, and thy glory unto their children; and let the beauty of Jehovah our God be upon us: and establish thou the work of our hands upon us; the work of our hands establish thou it.”⁶ It is worthy of notice that this prayer was answered. Though the first generation fell in the wilderness, yet the labours of Moses and his companions were blessed to the second. These were the most devoted to God of any generation that Israel ever saw. It was of them that the Lord said, “I remember thee, the kindness of thy youth, the love of thine espousals, when thou wentest after me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown. Israel was holiness unto the Lord, and the first-fruits of his increase.”⁷ It was then that Balaam could not curse, but, though desirous of the wages of unrighteousness, was compelled to forego them, and his curse was turned into a blessing.⁸ We are taught by this case, amidst temporal calamities and judgments, in which our earthly hopes may be in a manner extinguished, to seek to have the loss repaired by spiritual blessings. If God’s work does but appear to us and our posterity after us, we need not be dismayed at the evils which afflict the earth.

Similar remarks might be made on the state of the church at the captivity. When the temple was burnt, and the people reduced to slavery in a foreign land, it must seem as if the cause of God in the world would go to ruin. Hence the prayer of Habbakkuk, “O Lord, I have heard thy speech, and was afraid. O Lord, revive—or preserve alive—thy work in the midst of the years, in the midst of the years make known; in wrath remember mercy.”⁹ This prayer also was answered. The work of God did not suffer, but was promoted by the captivity. The church was purified, and the world, beholding the divine interposition, acknowledged, “The Lord hath done great things for them.”¹⁰

After the return of the captives, they went about to rebuild the temple, but they had many adversaries and no military force to protect them. On this occasion the prophet Zechariah (who with Haggai stood to strengthen the builders) had a vision. He saw, and behold “a candlestick, all of gold, with a bowl upon the top of it; and his seven lamps thereon; and seven pipes to the seven lamps; and two olive trees” on each side of the bowl, “which, through the golden pipes, emptied the golden oil out of themselves.”¹¹ On inquiry of the angel what these meant, he was answered, “This is the word of the Lord unto Zerubbabel, saying, Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, saith the Lord of hosts.”¹² As if he had said, This vision contains a message of encouragement to Zerubbabel, the purport of which is, Not by army or by power, etc., for, like as the candlestick is supplied without the hand of man, so God will prosper his cause, not by worldly power or armies, but by his gracious influence and superintending providence. Here also a lesson is taught us, not to wait for legal protection, or even toleration, before we endeavour to introduce the gospel into a country; but engage in the work, trusting in God, not only to succeed our labours, but, while acting on Christian principles, either to give us favour in the eyes of those with whom we have to do, or strength to endure the contrary.

Further, The success of the gospel in the times of the apostle is ascribed to the influence of the Holy Spirit as its first or primary cause. That the truth of the doctrine, and even the manner in which it was delivered, contributed as second causes to its success is allowed. Such appears to be the meaning of Acts 14:1, “They... so spake that a great multitude...believed.” But if we look to either of these as the first cause, we shall be unable to account for the little success of our Lord’s preaching when compared with that of his Apostles. He spake as never man spake; yet compared with them he laboured in

vain, and spent his strength for nought and in vain. It is the Holy Spirit to which the difference is ascribed. They did greater works than he, because, as he said, “I go to the Father.”¹³

In promising to be with his disciples to “the end of the world,”¹⁴ he could refer to no other than his spiritual presence. To this, therefore, he taught them to look for encouragement. To this cause, the success of the apostles is uniformly ascribed. “The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed, and turned to the Lord.”¹⁵ “God always causeth to triumph in Christ, and maketh manifest the savour of his knowledge by us in every place.”¹⁶ The Lord opened the heart of Lydia, and “she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul.”¹⁷ “The weapons of our warfare are... mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds.”¹⁸

The great success which prophecy gives us to expect in the latter days is ascribed to the same cause. Upon the land of my people shall be thorns and brier “until the Spirit be poured upon us from on high.” Then the wilderness would be a fruitful field, and that which had been hitherto considered as a fruitful field would be counted a forest.¹⁹

If the success of the Gospel were owing to the pliability of the people, or to any preparedness, natural or acquired for receiving it, we might have expected it to prevail most in those places which were the most distinguished by their morality and most cultivated in their minds and manners. But the fact was that in Corinth, a sink of debauchery, God had “much people”²⁰; whereas in Athens, the seat of polite literature, there were only a few individuals who embraced the truth. Nor was this the greatest display of the freeness of the Spirit: Jerusalem, which had not only withstood the preaching and miracles of the Lord, but had actually put him to death—Jerusalem bows at the pouring out of his Spirit; and not merely the common people, but “a great company of the priests, were obedient to the faith.”²¹

To the above may be added, the experience of

those whose ministry has been most blessed to the turning of sinners to God. Men of light and speculative minds, whose preaching produces scarcely any fruit, will go about to account for the renewal of the mind by the established laws of nature. But they who see most of this change among their hearers see most of God in it, and have been always ready to subscribe to the truth of our Lord's words to Peter, "Flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father who is in heaven."²²

To this brief statement of the evidence of the doctrine, we shall only add a few remarks to enforce "the prayer of faith" in your endeavours to propagate the Gospel both at home and abroad. This is the natural consequence of the doctrine. If all our help be in God, to him it becomes us to look for success. It was from a prayer-meeting, held in an upper room, that the first Christians descended, and commenced that notable attack on Satan's kingdom in which three thousand fell before them.²³ When Peter was imprisoned, prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him. When liberated by the angel, in the dead of night, he found his brethren engaged in this exercise.²⁴ It was in prayer that the late undertakings for spreading the gospel among the heathen originated.²⁵ We have seen success enough attend them to encourage us to go forward; and probably if we had been more sensible of our dependence on the Holy Spirit, and more importunate in our prayers, we should have seen much more. The prayer of faith falls not to the ground. If "we have not," it is "because we ask not"; or, if "we ask not and receive not," it is "because we seek amiss."²⁶ Joash smote thrice upon the ground and stayed, by which he cut short his victories.²⁷ Something analogous to this may be the cause of our having no more success than we have.

Consider, brethren, the dispensation under which we live. We are under the kingdom of the Messiah, fitly called "the ministration of the Spirit,"²⁸ because the richest effusions of the Holy Spirit are reserved for his reign, and

great accessions to the church from among the Gentiles ordained to grace his triumphs. It was fit that the death of Christ should be followed by the outpouring of the Spirit, that it might appear to be what it was, its proper effect; and that which was seen in the days of Pentecost was but an earnest of what is yet to come. To pray under such a dispensation is coming to God in a good time. In asking for the success of the Gospel, we ask that of the Father of heaven and earth in which his soul delighteth, and to which he has pledged his every perfection, namely, to glorify his Son.

Finally, compare the current language of prophecy with the state of things in the world and in the church.²⁹ In whatever obscurity the minutiae of future events may be involved, the events themselves are plainly revealed. We have seen the four monarchies, or preponderating powers, described by Daniel as successively ruling the world, namely, the Babylonian, the Persian, the Macedonian, and the Roman. We have seen the last subdivided into ten kingdoms, and the little papal horn growing up among them. We have seen the saints of the Most High "worn out" for more than a thousand years by his persecutions.³⁰ We have seen his rise, his reign, and, in a considerable degree, his downfall. "The judgment is set," and they have begun to "take away his dominion," and will go on "to consume and to destroy it unto the end." And when this is accomplished, "the kingdom and dominion, and the greatness of the kingdom under the whole heaven, will be given to the people of the saints of the Most High."³¹ It is not improbable that "the days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he shall begin to sound," have already commenced.³² Which voice, while it ushers in the vials or seven last plagues upon the anti-Christian powers, is to the church a signal of prosperity, for, the seventh angel having sounded, voices are heard in heaven, saying, "The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our

Lord and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever.”³³ The glorious things spoken of the church are not all confined to the days of the millennium. Many of them will go before it in like manner as the victorious days of David went before the rest, or pacific reign, of Solomon, and prepared its way. Previous to the fall of Babylon, an angel is seen flying in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach to them that dwell on the earth.³⁴ And before that terrible conflict in which the beast and the false prophet are taken, the Son of God is described as riding forth on a white horse, and the armies of heaven as following him.³⁵ The final ruin of the anti-Christian cause will be brought upon itself by its opposition to the progress of the Gospel.

The sum is, that the time for the promulgation of the Gospel is come. And, if attended to in a full dependence on the promise of the Spirit, it will, no doubt be successful. The rough places in its way are smoothing, that all flesh may see the salvation of God.³⁶ The greatest events pertaining to the kingdom of heaven have occurred in such a way as to escape the observation of the unbelieving world, and, it may be, of some believers. It was so at the coming of the Lord and probably will be so in much that is before us. If we look at events only with respect to instruments, second causes, and political bearings, we shall be filled with vexation and disquietude, and shall come within the sweep of that awful threatening, “Because they regard not the works of the Lord, nor the operations of his hands, he will destroy them, and not build them up.”³⁷ But if we keep our eye on the kingdom of God, whatever become of the kingdoms of this world, we shall reap advantage from everything that passeth before us. God in our times is shaking the heavens and the earth. But there are things which cannot be shaken. “Wherefore we, receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace whereby we may serve God acceptably, with reverence and godly fear.”³⁸

ENDNOTES

¹ This tract first appeared in 1810 as a circular letter of the Northamptonshire Baptist Association, which was sent out to its various member churches. Fuller wrote it, and his good friend John Sutcliff (1752–1814) of Olney signed it on behalf of the Association, being the Moderator for the annual meeting that year. The tract is reproduced from *The Complete Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller* (ed. Joseph Belcher, 1845; repr. Harrisonburg, Virginia: Sprinkle Publications, 1988), III, 359–363.

² The circular letter for 1809 was written by Robert Hall, Jr. (1764–1831) and was entitled *On the Work of the Holy Spirit*. See *The Works of the Rev. Robert Hall, A.M.* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1854), I, 233–245.

³ This is a reference to the formation of the Baptist Missionary Society in 1792. The comments that follow in the rest of this paragraph refer to the impetus that launching an overseas mission had upon home missions in Great Britain among the Baptists. For more on this, see Deryck W. Lovegrove, *Established Church, Sectarian People. Itineracy and the Transformation of English Dissent, 1780–1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); and R. Philip Roberts, *Continuity and Change: London Calvinistic Baptists and The Evangelical Revival 1760–1820* (Wheaton: Richard Owen Roberts, Publishers, 1989).

⁴ Matthew 28:20.

⁵ The use of the neuter pronoun “it” does not indicate a low view of the personality of the Holy Spirit. It reflects the Authorized Version’s use of this pronoun to refer to the Spirit (see, for example, Rom 8:16, 26) and the fact that in the original Greek the word for “Spirit” (*pneuma*) is neuter. On the masthead of this letter when it first appeared was a succinct statement of faith, in which it was affirmed, among other things, that the churches of the Northamptonshire Association believed in “three equal persons in the God-head.”

⁶ Psalm 90:16–17.

⁷ Jeremiah 2:2–3.

⁸ Numbers 22–23.

⁹ Habbakuk 3:1–2.

¹⁰ Cf. Psalm 126:3.

¹¹ Zechariah 4:2–3, 12.

¹² Zechariah 4:6.

¹³ John 14:12.

¹⁴ Matthew 28:20.

¹⁵ Acts 11:21.

¹⁶ 2 Corinthians 2:14.

¹⁷ Acts 16:14.

¹⁸ 2 Corinthians 10:4.

¹⁹ Isaiah 32:13, 15.

²⁰ Acts 18:10.

²¹ Acts 6:7.

²² Matthew 16:17.

²³ Acts 1–2.

²⁴ Acts 12.

²⁵ This is a reference to the Prayer Call of 1784. Influenced by a treatise of Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) on corporate prayer for revival, Fuller's close friend John Sutcliff had proposed at the annual meeting of the Northamptonshire Association that year that monthly prayer meetings for revival be established. The subsequent renewal of the British Particular Baptist community and the birth of the Baptist Missionary Society is intimately linked to these regular gatherings for prayer which continued for the next forty years or so. The Prayer Call is attached to John Ryland, Jr., *The Nature, Evidences, and Advantages, of Humility* (Circular Letter of the Northamptonshire Association, 1784), 12. For further information, see Michael A. G. Haykin, "Can we Pray and Work for Worldwide Revival? Revival—The Perspective of

John Sutcliff (1752–1814)", *Reformation Today*, 104 (July-August, 1988): 9–17 and idem, "John Sutcliff and the Concert of Prayer," *Reformation & Revival Journal*, 1:3 (1992): 65–88.

²⁶ Cf. James 4:2–3.

²⁷ 2 Kings 13:18–19.

²⁸ 2 Corinthians 3:8.

²⁹ In an earlier reprint of this circular letter that the editor prepared for publication, the following two paragraphs dealing with prophecy were omitted [see Michael A. G. Haykin, "Andrew Fuller and 'The Promise of the Spirit' ", *The Banner of Truth*, 278 (November 1986): 1–8]. This was a mistake. I underestimated the importance of prophecy and its fulfillment for Fuller and his colleagues. For the proper perspective, see Iain H. Murray, *The Puritan Hope: A Study in Revival and the Interpretation of Prophecy* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1971), especially 149–155; Howard Peskett, "Missions and Eschatology" in *Eschatology in Bible and Theology: Evangelical Essays at the Dawn of a New Millennium* (eds. Kent E. Brower and Mark W. Elliott; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 303–308.

³⁰ Daniel 7.

³¹ Daniel 7:26–27.

³² Revelation 10:7.

³³ Revelation 11:14–15.

³⁴ Revelation 14:6–8.

³⁵ Revelation 19:11, 15–19.

³⁶ See Luke 3:5–6.

³⁷ Psalm 38:5.

³⁸ Hebrews 12:28.