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Booknotes

The Holy Spirit and the Life of the Church: A Comparison of Montague and Moule

In this essay I will consider the biblical pneumatology of George T. Montague and C. F. D. Moule relative to three topic areas—the ethic of Christian life as inspired and formed by the Holy Spirit, the role of individual and community discernment concerning apparent manifestations of the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit as a sign of the “future present” and pledge of the fulfillment of the already begun but not yet completed coming of the kingdom of God. I will consider Montague’s *The Holy Spirit: Growth of a Biblical Tradition* (New York: Paulist Press, 1976) and Moule’s *The Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978). Although Montague is a Roman Catholic and Moule is an Anglican, they have much in common. They reflect deep faith informed by critical biblical reflection on issues of importance for Christian faith today. The parallels in their biblical pneumatology provide a significant basis for ecumenical theology and Christian unity.

The Ethic of Christian Life as Inspired and Formed by the Holy Spirit

How can the Holy Spirit be known in the world? How revealed? The Holy Spirit must be revealed and made known through people, especially people who receive the gifts of the Spirit in faith and respond in love through the witness of their lives. Any apparent activity of the Holy Spirit that consistently left lives unchanged, or changed for the worse, would certainly be suspect. The biblical tradition records occasions—such as the Pentecost event of Acts 2—in which lives are healed, transformed, and inspired by the activity of the Holy Spirit. In light of this connection between the activity of the Holy Spirit and human behavior as recorded in the New Testament, it is possible to discuss the “ethic” of the Spirit.

Montague notes that it is the Spirit that enables Christians to love God (p. 136). Montague explains that love is at the heart of the ethic of the Spirit. He states that “To walk in the Lord Jesus means in effect to walk in love (Eph. 5:2), according to the teaching of Jesus and above all according to his example . . . and by the power of that same love poured into the heart by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5; Gal. 5:22)” (p. 164). Montague also notes that the Spirit tends toward the upbuilding of the community of faith, and the

valuing of all the gifts and members represented in community. Concerning 1 Corinthians, Montague notes that Paul evaluates the gifts of the Spirit in terms of their effectiveness for "building up the life of the community" (p. 162, citing 1 Cor. 14:12). The ethic of upbuilding the community is a recurring theme for Montague. In his discussion of Matthew, he notes that

the Christian charismatic is authenticated by a life of personal holiness. For Matthew the authentic prophet is, like the authentic disciple, also a just man (10:40-42; 13:17). If the result of false prophecy is that the charity of many grows cold (24:12), we may infer that the role of true prophecy is to build up the community in love—a point on which Matthew would agree with Paul (pp. 309-310).

The Spirit ethic of upbuilding the community and serving on behalf of the community may include both particular gifts and responsibilities as well as gifts and responsibilities that are shared by the members of the community as a whole. For example, Montague notes both general and particular gifts of the Spirit in the community for healing. In his discussion of 1 Corinthians, he states that some members of the Christian community have a "special anointing" to engage in a ministry of healing. But this "does not preclude the whole community of believers in the Lord from laying hands upon the sick for their recovery (Mk. 16:18) or the elders in the church from anointing with oil for healing (James 5:14)" (p. 153). Montague adds that "The Lord guarantees his presence in these general or 'official' ways in the church as well as through the charismatic endowment of certain individuals" (p. 153).

Moule also recognizes the activity of the Spirit in terms of both ongoing presence and relationship in the community, as well as specific and occasional gifting within the community. Moule notes that "believers, who, by definition, have the Spirit already, and in a distinctively Christian manner, are described as subsequently filled with Spirit again for some special crisis or need—Peter, for instance, in Acts 4:8, Stephen in Acts 6:8 . . . or Paul in Acts 13:9. . ." (pp. 91-92). Moule adds that confirmation, ordination of a priest, and consecration of a bishop "can all be recognized as occasions on which persons already endowed with the Spirit are nevertheless equipped with a special accession of spiritual ability for the tasks to which they are called" (p. 92).

Moule understands the gifting of the Spirit in terms of enabling Christians to recognize their relationship of love with God and to proclaim their faith through evangelism and mission. In this regard, he finds in Christianity "a striking and radically new nexus of ideas and events: water-Spirit-death-life-sonship" (p. 33). By the Spirit, the Christian becomes a participator in this "new nexus of ideas and events," and this participation is formative for Christian identity and ethics. Moule explains,

If the Spirit enables us to be reborn in God's family and to address him with Christ's own "Abba!", it is by the Spirit, too, that we can recognize Christ as Lord. The Son of

God who does his Father's will even to the length of death on the cross is rightly acclaimed as Lord (Phil 2:11); and it is the Spirit in us that makes the acclamation for us: the Spirit cries "Jesus is Lord" (1 Cor. 12:3) (p. 30).

Moule notes that the Spirit's empowering of the Christian for proclamation and witness is focused in terms of the ethic and ministry of evangelism. Moule notes that it is the Spirit who "inspired, directed, and confirmed at every stage" the Church's expansion through evangelism as recorded in Acts, that the apostles are endowed with the Spirit when they are sent out by the risen Christ in John 20, and that the Spirit "accompanies and empowers and authenticates evangelism" in the epistles (p. 37). The Spirit ethic is one of openness to others, activated by the Spirit, generously sharing the love and Good News of God. Moule urges that "it is precisely the Holy Spirit that activates the evangelistic work of Christians. If the Holy Spirit is recognized in Christians alone, it is certainly not in order to make them a closed circle. On the contrary, the effect is to open them, indefinitely and constantly, to what is outside and beyond them, and to send them out into the world with responsible concern for everybody" (p. 20). Moule's Spirit ethic encourages an inclusive attitude toward all kinds of people who may be or become members of the community.

Similarly, Montague states that an appreciation of the divine source of gifts (in terms of Christian identity) and the purpose of the gifts (in terms of upbuilding the community) serves to relativize the importance of other distinctions among persons. This makes for an ethic that values all members of community and avoids prejudice towards any member. Montague explains,

The one Spirit and the one body into which Christians are baptized dissolves the distinction between Jew and Gentile, between slave and free citizen, and by implication all other distinctions that were previously experienced as barriers to real unity. The only distinctions that remain in the Christian community are the gifts of service, all of which are aimed at building up the same body (pp. 157-158).

Moule's Spirit ethic of evangelism seems to go well with Montague's Spirit ethic for the upbuilding of the community. In both cases, the life, ministry, and expansion of the community are understood to be inspired and gifted by the Spirit. This "gifting" takes place in terms of both the Spirit's ongoing relationship and presence, as well as particular and individual giftings of members of the community for ministries to serve the mission of the community. Accordingly, the Christian must be open to receive these gifts and to participate in the life of community.

Montague emphasizes that the ethic of the Spirit is a way of life and attitude of openness to the Spirit—not a legalistic collection of do's and don't's. In his discussion of Galatians, Montague urges that the Christian life "is not virtue acquired by practice." Instead, the Christian life "is a gift of being

moved by the Spirit of God, and the key to life is to allow the Spirit to lead." Accordingly, Montague explains, "When confronted with any moral decision, great or small, the Christian's first question should be 'where does the Spirit lead me in this?'" (p. 200). Montague likewise warns against the dangers of an attitude and ethic of being closed to the working of the Spirit. Relative to John's promise of the Paraclete "if you love me" in John 14, Montague notes that "The gift of the Spirit cannot be given, because it cannot be received, in one who does not love Jesus and live according to his word" (p. 350).

Moule also notes the importance of openness to receive the Holy Spirit. He understands the "unforgivable sin" in terms of a closed attitude toward the Spirit. Such a refusal to receive the Spirit would block the Spirit's gift of forgiveness. Moule states,

It is understandable that *for as long as* a person deliberately shuts his eyes like this to truth, or *while* he is consciously disloyal to what he believes to be his true allegiance, it is impossible for him to be reconciled with God. And it is intelligible that such attitudes should be described in terms of a person's stance towards the Spirit of God (p. 33).

Moule's Spirit ethic also emphasizes the gifting of the Spirit as formative for Christian character. He notes that "The Spirit creates in Christians the character of Christ. It is by the Spirit that Christ comes into a life" (p. 77). Similarly, he explains that it is by the Spirit "that Christians are enabled to act as Christians and kill dead all that is contrary to God's will (Rom. 8:13), and that Christ's character begins to be formed in each Christian through the filial relation with God" (p. 30). Moule states that the presence of the Spirit will be formative for Christian character. Sooner or later, this character formation will be expressed through the practice of a Spirit ethic. Moule notes that if the Spirit is truly present, "then, whether there are immediately visible signs or not, there will certainly be the beginnings of the basic, less demonstrative, but all-important qualities that mark the Christian character" (pp. 85-86).

Both Moule and Montague emphasize the importance of openness for the Christian who would receive the gifts of the Spirit and participate in the Spirit's presence through the life of community. Through this participation and the presence of the Spirit, the Christian will be called to practice a Spirit ethic that will serve the upbuilding of the community, and the needs of evangelism and mission. The Christian will be called to a life of love and openness to the gifts of the Spirit, with a concern to reach and include all kinds of people in the Spirit-filled life of the community.

The Role of Discernment and Apparent Manifestations of the Holy Spirit

Discernment is necessary for any discussion of a "Spirit ethic," or the formative activity of the Spirit relative to human behavior, attitudes, and

character. Some things done or said in the name of the Spirit may be misguided or inauthentic, so the community and its members must exercise discernment concerning apparent manifestations of the Spirit.

Montague connects the need for community discernment with an intriguing interpretation of the role of law in the Church of the New Testament period. Montague urges that the Spirit is "the 'prime mover'" and the "*life* of the Christian," not merely the means for fulfilling the laws and standards of the community. Montague explains that "Concrete norms of behavior, such as those published by Paul in his letters, belong rather to the process of *discerning* the Spirit" (p. 202). In his commentary on Galatians, Montague understands the law to provide published and authoritative norms for discerning the movement of the Spirit. Montague notes that the Spirit "is a constantly inventive and creative agent." It is the Spirit—not the law—that gives life. The life-giving activity of the Spirit may be discerned by reference to the law.

For Paul, Montague explains, the Spirit's activity is "so pure and noble that it transcends any of the negative prescriptions of the law, old or new." But Paul "is also aware that not every impulse is from the Holy Spirit and that every movement must be tested (1 Thess. 5:19-21). Norms, such as Paul's teaching, and the virtue-and-vice lists we find in Gal. 5:19-22, were one of the tools for such discernment" (p. 202). Similarly, with respect to the Second Letter of Peter, Montague notes that for the author of the letter "the interpretation of Scriptural prophecy in the church is to be discerned by its conformity to the apostolic tradition and recognized apostolic authority and not simply by the individual's claim to have a gift of prophecy, interpretation or teaching." This appeal to apostolic tradition and authority "reflects an attempt to cope with a pneumaticism gone rampant" (p. 316). And so the apostolic tradition and authority, like the law in another situation, become the objective standard for discernment concerning the true activity of the Spirit in community.

Montague identifies the need for discernment of nuances and degrees of the Spirit's activity by the community. Discernment requires more than simply determining whether an apparent gift is or is not "from the Spirit." In his commentary on 1 Corinthians, Montague notes that even "among those who are using the gifts, there is need for discerning the degree of anointing—that is, how much of the statement comes from the Lord (14:29), as well as the need to discern *how* the gift is to be used in a community setting (all of chapter 14)" (p. 154).

Similarly, Moule states that persons with prophetic gifts were recognized but "not accepted blindly as final authorities" at Christian gatherings of the New Testament period. He explains that the community would need to "exercise their critical judgement" after hearing a prophetic statement in God's name that specified "the right course of action in the face of some need

or problem" (pp. 63-64). In this regard, Moule notes that Paul ignores the prophet Agabus's warning against going to Jerusalem (Acts 21:10-14), even though Agabus had correctly "foretold by the Spirit" a great famine (Acts 11:28) (p. 64). Although Agabus's reputation as a prophet was established, his prophecy was subject to discernment. Paul evidently concluded that Agabus's prophetic warning against the trip to Jerusalem was not in harmony with God's will.

Moule also provides a valuable insight about the cooperative nature of the Spirit's activity in the person, and he offers this insight in the context of his discussion of discernment. He notes that the Holy Spirit works along with the person, never possessing or displacing the human subject. Since the person is fallible and not possessed or displaced, discernment is necessary whenever the Spirit seems to be revealed through human agency (pp. 64-66). Moule explains that "since the recipient is fallible and human, his reception of the divine intimations is bound always to be subject to error and to uncertainties of interpretation; and the same is true of his hearers" (p. 64).

We may overlap the first two topics of this study to note that the need for discernment in matters of the Spirit is formative for an ethic of Christian decision-making. Moule notes that the Christians of the New Testament "looked to God for guidance" but "did not expect it to be infallible." They knew that God's guidance "comes through inspired utterance, through mutual consultation, through searching the conscience." Moule then urges that the same process be used today: "Christian decisions have to be reached by pooling all the available expert information about the matter in hand (whether the experts are Christians or not): by bringing to bear such insights as Christians are given into the true function and destiny of man in God's design; and by bringing all this in prayer to God" (p. 66). The Spirit "works with" human faculties to provide inspiration, guidance, and revelation; and human discernment is necessary to recognize the activity of the Spirit, which calls for "working with" all available resources on the part of the discerning community.

The Holy Spirit as Sign of the "Future Present" and Pledge of the Not-yet-completed Coming of the Kingdom of God

Montague finds many New Testament witnesses to the Spirit's role as inaugurator and sign of the "future present," the now-present beginning of the fulfillment of the kingdom of God. Through the Spirit's activity and presence, the eschatological future is begun (although not yet completed) in today's world. Montague notes in his discussion of 2 Corinthians that the risen Lord is called the "*first-fruits* of those who have fallen asleep" in 1 Corinthians 15:20, and that "Since the Christian experience of the Holy Spirit is a participation here and now in the risen life of the Lord, it too could be called the

'first-fruits.'" He identifies Paul's "newness of insight" that "the Spirit is the gift of the future in the present" (pp. 186-187).

Similarly, with respect to Galatians 3, Montague notes that Paul finds the fulfillment of God's promise in present experience through the Spirit instead of pointing to an exclusively future fulfillment. He explains that for Paul,

There is, no doubt, still a greater fulfillment to await. But for its essence, the Holy Spirit *is* the life Jesus gives, the Holy Spirit *is* the future already now, the Holy Spirit *is* the blessing God promises to every believer beginning with Abraham (pp. 195-196).

Montague also emphasizes the theme of the "future present" in the Letter to the Hebrews. Montague notes that the author of the Letter to the Hebrews "might be said to view the Christian and the Christian community as living already now penetrated to the heart by a shaft of light from heaven, a light that is sweetness and joy as much as it is power" (p. 320). With respect to those who have "tasted the heavenly gift and become sharers in the Holy Spirit" and "tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come" (Hebrews 6:4-5), Montague explains that "'The powers of the world to come' are to be understood of the dynamic powers and wonders of the Holy Spirit already manifest now (2:4; Gal. 3:5) which on the one hand proclaim that the messianic age has begun (Acts 2:11ff.) and on the other give a real foretaste, an actual beginning of the age to come (Mt. 12:32)" (p. 320). Montague finds a clear pneumatology of the already-but-not-yet concerning the age to come.

Moule also understands the Spirit in terms of the future present. He explains that the presence of the Spirit is "the guarantee that God will ultimately claim and redeem his people," and a "sign of the beginning of the fulfillment of God's final purpose" (p. 76). Like Montague, Moule focuses on the image of the Spirit as first fruits. Moule urges that "the Holy Spirit is the first fruits, guaranteeing the holiness of the whole crop, the 'earnest' or 'deposit,' guaranteeing the full payment, or the seal, marking God's ownership and (if the metaphor be pressed) perhaps guaranteeing that the property will reach its proper destination (Rom. 8:23, 2 Cor. 1:22, 5:5, Eph. 1:14)" (p. 76).

The advent of the Spirit for Moule is both the beginning of the end times, and the occasion for the inclusion of all who will receive the Spirit into the charismatic community of faith. With respect to the Pentecost event, he explains that "the endowment of the company with special gifts is seen as a sign of the beginning of the last act in God's great drama of salvation, just as, in 2 Cor. 3, Paul sees the constant presence of the Spirit as a mark of a new, post-Mosaic era." Moule also points to the inclusive nature of the Spirit-filled community: "Formerly, then, the Spirit was only for exceptional leaders; now, it is for all who are ready to receive the Spirit" (p. 36). This understanding of the activity and presence of the Spirit is also formative for a Spirit ethic that

encourages the inclusion of all kinds of people in the life of community, and recognition that all who will receive may be inspired and gifted by the Spirit.

Both Montague and Moule understand the advent of the Spirit in terms of redemption of the past and the beginning of the completion of the future. In this regard, both Montague and Moule believe the Pentecost event "reversed the curse of Babel (Gen. 11)" (pp. 87-88; see Montague, p. 282, pp. 300-301). Montague celebrates Pentecost by noting that "The divisive nature of languages, Genesis' climactic symbol of man's social disintegration due to his hubris, is now overcome by the one Spirit" (Montague, p. 282). Similarly, Moule notes that at Pentecost "The alienated and scattered nations are reconciled in the language of the Spirit" (p. 88).

The correspondence of approach to biblical pneumatology by the Roman Catholic Montague and the Anglican Moule suggests a basis for renewed ecumenical understanding today. For both, the gift of the Spirit is formative for Christian ethics and character. For both, the gift of the Spirit is the occasion for discernment in the praxis of daily Christian life, and the already-present promise of the fulfillment of God's saving purpose.

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