THE FULLNESS OF THE SPIRIT

William Marvin Greathouse

"May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of my heart, be acceptable to Thee, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer."

My family were misplaced Tennesseans when I was born in Van Buren, Arkansas. My birth was the sequel to my mother's conversion at the local Methodist Church. She returned home and began to pray for a son, covenanting to give him back to God if her prayer was answered. I was born on April 29, 1919, and named from Southern Methodist bishop Marvin. Faithful to her vow, Mother saw that I received Christian baptism and brought me up "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." I was cradled and nourished in the bosom of Southern Methodism.

When I was 14, I came conviction of sin in a tent revival in Jackson, Tennessee (where my family had returned in 1923) under the ministry of a Methodist evangelist. For two years I was the "wretched man" of Romans 7:14-24. "When I would do good, evil was present with me." In the summer of 1935, Earle and Elizabeth Vennum (Elizabeth later conceived the Alabaster Box program) were sent to Jackson to plant a Nazarene church, pitching a tent on the spot where the Methodist meeting had been conducted two years earlier. Mother and Dad commented, "Another bunch of holy rollers have come to town!"

Backtrack with me to the late 1800s, when the holiness revival was sweeping through Tennessee Methodism. Eighteen miles from Jackson, R. L. Harris had organized the New Testament Church of Christ. My family had evidently been among those who stumbled over holiness, for in my spiritual upbringing Mother would say, "Billy, some people teach you can be sanctified -- that you can't sin. Don't believe it!" At the same time, she was a devout, praying woman of God I as a child had sometimes heard groan in spirit in our Methodist services. Mother was "hungering and thirsting after God" —and one Sunday night decided to visit the
Nazarene tent meeting. I will never forget her saying to me, upon her returning from that service, "Billy, there is something to sanctification!" She was soon a seeker and happy finder.

On Monday, August 5, 1935, I visited the Nazarene campaign, sitting at the end of a bench near the outside "just in case of an emergency!" During the sermon the Spirit spoke to me. When the invitation was extended I fairly ran to the altar, and on the way a miracle occurred. "[Christ] broke the power of cancelled sin and set this prisoner free!" I became a new creation in Christ. For two years I enjoyed constant victory.

All the while my pastor and others were urging me to go on to entire sanctification. I began erroneously to seek "the blessing" (rather than "the Blesser"). In August of 1936 my pastor, C. O. Miller, and I set out in his new Graham-Page sedan for the Southern California Nazarene camp. I recall vividly checking in one evening at a motel in Big Springs, Texas. That night, in my devotions I read the five chapters of First Thessalonians, unforgettably hearing Paul, at chapter 5 pray that his readers might be "sanctified wholly." To this day First Thessalonians stands out as a holiness epistle.

Under the preaching of Drs. B. F. Neely and H. V. Miller, I was further illuminated in holiness teaching. One night I went forward to be sanctified, and Dr. C. W. Ruth (who had been Dr. Bressee's assistant at LA First) came off the platform to pray with me. Nothing happened, however. The following year I continued to seek the "blessing" (not knowing quite what I needed).

Finally, after a Sunday dinner in May 1937, I locked myself in the bedroom, praying, "Lord, I'm staying here until you do something I know about." Evidently God knew I was ready to act, for no sooner had I uttered those words than a Voice asked: "Are you willing to go back to Arkansas — and the world never know Billy Greathouse ever lived?" (I had been called to preach, but pride was lurking in my heart!) Then the Spirit put to me a second question: "Would you be willing to go as a missionary to
China? (We had a flourishing work there at the time.) "Yes, Lord," I immediately responded – if Ruth can go with me." (I was "engaged to be engaged!”) Then the Lord pierced me to the depths of my being: "Will you go alone?" "Alone, Lord, alone?" I asked. "Yes, alone," He answered. After deep heart searching and struggling, I finally said, "Yes, Lord, if that is your will, I will go alone." The issue settled, I leapt to my feet in ecstasy.

The dearest idol I have I have known,
Whate’er that idol be,
Help me tear it from the throne,
And worship only Thee!

That fall I went to Bethany Peniel College, where after hearing Louise Robinson preach at a Bethany First Church missionary service, I returned to the dorm and locked my roommate J. Lewis Ingle out of our room – to have God make clear to me, in a definite way, that my call was to the USA.

Fast forward to 1956, when by that time I was Dean of Religion at Trevecca Nazarene College. In January, Methodist holiness evangelist John R. Church was the "Benson Speaker." He "dropped time bombs” that began to “explode” that spring, among both students and faculty. By May, I became aware of a need I could not define. (I had already agreed to write the 50th anniversary study book on the Holy Spirit [1958]. What followed I now believe was God’s deeper preparation of my heart for that writing).

God’s answer to my need came through R. T. Kendall, my student assistant, who at that time was pastor of a small church near Chattanooga. Driving home one Sunday night, under deep conviction for the Spirit’s infilling, he “heard ‘the Son’ say, ‘Father, he wants it,’” then to "hear the Father say, ‘He can have it!’" – when the Spirit came! He related his experience to me, and this kindled in me a deep hunger for God. With R. T. at my side, a few days later, I was reading a small book on the Holy Spirit by Dr. Tony Anderson, when I came to a passage in John,
where Jesus says, "If ye love me, keep my commandments. And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you forever; even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you" (13:15-17 KJV). I stopped reading, pushed back my chair and began to whisper, "He has come! He has come!"

For the next weeks I would awaken in the morning, my heart flooded with the joy of the Spirit. It was a period of uninterrupted ecstasy; my eyes had been opened to see the inner heart of Paul and Wesley, both of whom I was teaching at that time. I remember myself saying to myself, "Why, Paul and Wesley are writing about holiness from within!" Christ was making "all things new" for me! My little boat, stranded on the seashore, had been lifted on the mighty tide of the Spirit, into the deep! The Fullness of the Spirit, though far from perfect, expresses what I had found of the Triune God that spring:

"What has the Bible to say about the Holy Spirit as a Person? We cannot rightly understand His work or come into right relationship with the Holy Spirit himself, and thus know His gracious work in our souls, unless we acknowledge His true personality: ....

"To think of the Holy Spirit as an impersonal influence is a rob Him of the worship which is due Him as the Third Person of the adorable Trinity....

"To know and worship the Holy Spirit, however, is more than correct theology. He must come in His personal indwelling if we are to have an inner and sanctifying knowledge of Him. The passage which prefaces this chapter [John 14:15-18] became the channel of this personal knowledge to the writer. Painfully he had become aware that his life was not bearing the fruit of the Spirit. Inner unrest and occasional defeat marred his fellowship with God. His heart was yearning for the fullness of the Spirit as he was reading St. John's sacred words. Then suddenly it happened! His heart began to burn within him as he knew with that knowledge that passes intellectual understanding that the Holy Spirit had himself come to abide. With the coming of the Comforter the truth suddenly became unutterably personal. For years he had believed intellectually in the personality of the Holy Spirit, but in that moment he knew Him in His personal fullness" (55, 56).
I worship Thee, O Holy Ghost,
I love to worship Thee;
Each day with Thee is Pentecost,
Each night nativity!

What do I make of all this? I do not know, any more than Dr. Bresee knew what his "ball of fire" experience in Los Angeles meant. God forbid that I compare myself with Dr. Phineas Bresee! I can only confess "the things which I have seen and heard."

Although The Fullness of the Spirit is far from perfect in all I wrote there, I have not be able, when asked by NPH to revise it, to touch its pages. I would say some things differently now, of course, but coming from my pen in the fresh bloom of the Spirit’s outpouring, it seems sacrosanct to me (I can only hope you understand.) One further word may be added, however, to bring to date where I now find myself in the Spirit: as I write I joyously resonate with Raniero Cantalamassa’s Contemplating The Trinity: The Path to the Abundant Christian Life (The Word Among Us Press: Ijamsville, Maryland, 2007). It defines for me what a life of holiness should be (and is) through our participation in love of the Triune God. (Dr. Dennis Kinlaw made the same statement as I conversed with him today [Feb. 7, 2007].)

This is the first time I have told the full story, which I must continue by adding that R. T. Kendall and I have prayed for one another daily for more than fifty years. R. T. testifies that on the evening of the day he received the "baptism of the Holy Spirit" (R. T. Kendall and Rabbi David Rosen, The Christian and the Pharisee [Faith Words: New York, 2006], 13), he received the witness of his eternal salvation. As a consequence he became a convinced Calvinist, writing his D.Phil dissertation at Oxford, later published by Oxford Press as John Calvin and English Calvinism, to 1545 (Oxford Press). He and I have debated this point, in love, through the years.

Having read E. A. Girvin’s Phineas F. Bresee: A Prince I Israel, as a personal friend of President Jack Ford of BINC, Dr. Martin Lloyd Jones met and urged R. T., "Never lose your Nazarene
fire!"—then recommended him as his successor at historic Westminster Chapel, where R. T. remained 25 years, to become known as a friend of the Church of the Nazarene in Britain. Through the years he maintained a cordial relationship with British Isles Nazarene College, and once, at Dr. John Allan Knight's request, preached the ordination sermon for the British Isles South district.

R. T. has written 40 books in the past years, with his Total Forgiveness selling 200,000 copies. Upon reading the latter, I remarked, "R. T., these pages are evidence to me that you are entirely sanctified. Your understanding of what occurred in you at the 'baptism of the Holy Spirit' John Wesley defined "the full assurance of hope," given rarely in times of great outpourings of the Spirit, such as occurred at TNC in 1956 (see John Wesley, Letters, V, 358; VI, 323; VII, 57-58).

Listen to Wesley's April 10, 1781 letter to Hester Ann Roe:

"Many of our brethren and sisters in London, during that great outpouring of the Spirit [in 1762] spoke of several new blessings which they had attained. But after all, they could find nothing higher than pure love, on which the full assurance of hope generally attends. This the inspired writings always represent as the highest point; only there are innumerable degrees of it. The plerophory (or full assurance) of faith is such a clear conviction that I am now in the favour of God as excludes all doubt and fear concerning it. The full assurance of hope is such clear confidence that I shall enjoy the glory of God as excludes all doubt and fear concerning this. And this confidence is totally different from the opinion that 'no saint shall fall from grace.' It has no relation to it. Bold, presumptuous men often substitute this as counter in the room of the precious confidence. But it is observable that the opinion remains just as strong while men are sinning and serving the devil as while they are serving God. Holiness or unholiness does not affect it in the least degree. Whereas, the giving way to anything unoff. either in will or heart, clouds that full assurance or hope; which cannot subsist any longer than the heart cleaves steadfastly to God" (VII, 58. Italics Wesley's).

When I read to K. T. quotations from the above Wesley letters, he said: "I never heard that. Send me those quotes." It may be that the differences between my dear friend K.T. and myself the spirit may be melting away. There is after all, such a
thing as "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" that prevails in the one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.