

# *Epiclesis*

## A Biblical Alternative

### David Phillips

Strictly speaking the word *epiclesis* means 'invocation'. The word does not appear in scripture although *epikaleomai* does. This can mean 'surnamed' but more generally means 'invoke' and 'call upon'. For example, as Stephen was dying, he called upon (*epikaleomai*) the Lord Jesus to receive his spirit (Jesus did not 'come down upon' Stephen!).

The notion of epiclesis as 'calling down upon' is not biblical but a later development. It raises questions about the role of the Holy Spirit.

**Should we 'call down' the Holy Spirit?** The closest that we come to this in scripture is Acts chapter 8 verse 15 where Peter and John pray that the Samaritan converts might 'receive' the Holy Spirit. The clearly exceptional nature of this event in salvation history makes it difficult to generalise from it. The most that can be said is that we should pray that God would grant the Holy Spirit to new disciples. This should have liturgical expression at baptism.

There are of course instances of the Holy Spirit coming upon people for specific purposes (prophecy, mass execution, the conception of Christ for example) but all are pre-Pentecost. The only other passage that might be cited is Ephesians chapter 5 verse 18 'instead be filled with the Holy Spirit'. Again there are issues about the interpretation of this phrase but even disregarding these there is no suggestion of any external work of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit already indwells those to whom Paul is speaking.

Since the Holy Spirit indwells believers **it is misleading to pray for the Holy Spirit to come down upon someone who is already regenerate.** It could be argued that in view of the limitations of language a phrase like 'come down' helps us better grasp a difficult concept but because it is neither scriptural language nor a scriptural concept and because of later misuse, we should steer well clear. Instead we may legitimately pray that the Holy Spirit might work in us in accordance with the promises of God.

(Note : The idea of the Holy Spirit 'coming down upon' anything other than people is entirely alien to scripture.)

Many of the Reformers cut away the later accretions and restored a proper biblical understanding of epiclesis to their liturgies. Most of the continental reformed churches introduced petitions to the Holy Spirit (an epiclesis - calling upon). This was not a prayer that the Holy Spirit might 'come down upon' us or that He might 'fill' us but rather that He might accomplish His work within us, in all its fullness.

This dimension is not reflected in the liturgy of Thomas Cranmer. Though some of the sentiments find expression in his service the closest he comes to a genuine epiclesis is the Collect for Purity, and that is rather stretching the point. It has been suggested that in the 'prayer of consecration' Cranmer almost has an epiclesis in the sense of 'calling down the Spirit upon' but this is to badly misrepresent him.

To illustrate the point a very developed epiclesis from the Anglican Puritan Richard Baxter may be helpful. It is addressed directly to the Holy Spirit which is unusual in Anglican prayer but otherwise the structure is very familiar. It draws on what we know of the character and work of the Holy Spirit from scripture and relates this to the promises of God associated with the Lord's Supper.

*Most Holy Spirit, proceeding from the Father and the Son: by whom Christ was conceived; by whom the prophets and apostles were inspired, and the ministers of Christ are qualified and called: that dwellest and workest in all the members of Christ, whom thou sanctifiest to the image and for the service of their Head, and comfortest them that they may shew for his praise: illuminate us, that by faith we may see him that is here represented to us. Soften our hearts, and humble us for our sins. Sanctify and quicken us, that we may relish the spiritual food, and feed on it to our nourishment and growth in grace. Shed abroad the love of God upon our hearts, and draw them out in love to him. Fill us with thankfulness and holy joy, and with love to one another. Comfort us by witnessing that we are children of God. Confirm us for new obedience. Be the earnest of our inheritance, and seal us up to everlasting life. Amen.*

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