

Is 'Slain in the Spirit' Biblical?

By Anand Peter

This is a much-debated subject in Christian circles, and scarcely anyone agrees with anyone else about it. I set out, some time ago, to look into the matter for myself, prompted by watching, within my own church group, a recording of a televised evangelistic meeting in which a great many people fell to the ground — the cameramen, interestingly, quite unaffected — whenever the evangelist made a gesture toward them, or laid a hand upon them. My own reaction was immediate, though I hesitate to claim it was Spirit-led. Some warned me, in response, that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit brings judgement — forgetting, perhaps, that we shall all be judged. Our own pastor brought the matter to a close by reminding us that we ought to hold only to what is Biblical. I know that a good many people read the exchange that followed, though I could not say what any of them made of it. Perhaps some were afraid of appearing to offend the Holy Spirit by speaking against the practice; perhaps others simply preferred to sit on the fence.

The expression "slain in the Spirit" is used, in certain Christian circles, to describe a supposed movement of the Holy Spirit upon a person — the claim being that the Spirit moves with such power that the person is "slain": not that they die, but that they are so overcome by the Spirit's presence that they fall to the ground, entirely overwhelmed.

It is worth noticing that reports of this overwhelming presence hardly ever arise when a person is alone. It happens, instead, at church gatherings, evangelistic meetings, and healing services — many of them now regularly televised, and gathering large numbers of believers. It is worth noticing, too, that in most such meetings, a particular time is set aside for healing, or for "receiving the Spirit," following a period of loud, sustained prayer, preaching, singing, and dancing. The preacher, pastor, or evangelist, enjoying a reputation as one close to God, or anointed by Him, moves among the people, laying a hand upon their foreheads, and they fall — "slain in the Spirit," overcome, it is said, by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. This display is unfortunate, since it cannot be verified, is often ostentatious, and could as easily be no more than the overpowering of a person's own emotions, the pressure of the crowd around them, or something closer to hypnotism. A good many accounts from those present at such meetings confirm that those unwilling to be so affected simply were not.

Though neither the expression "slain in the Spirit" nor "falling under the power" is found in Scripture, it is worth examining what Scripture does say concerning experiences that are sometimes put forward in support of the practice.

In 2 Chronicles 5, we read of the completion of Solomon's Temple, and of the events at its dedication. Verses 2 to 13 describe the great gathering, the sacrifices, the singing, the sound of trumpets, and the shouts of praise to God; and we read, in verse 14, "So that the priests could not stand to minister by reason of the cloud: for the glory of the LORD had filled the house of God" (2 Chronicles 5:14). I accept this account entirely.

On the night of His arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, John records: "Jesus therefore, knowing all things that should come upon him, went forth, and said unto them, Whom seek ye? They answered him, Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus saith unto them, I am he. And Judas also, which betrayed him, stood with them. As soon then as he had said unto them, I am he, they went backward, and fell to the ground" (John 18:4-6). When the Holy Spirit revealed Jesus for who He truly was, those present were overcome by His divine presence, and fell to the ground. I accept that this, too, took place exactly as described.

The conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus is often cited by those who hold that "slain in the Spirit" is Biblical. In Acts 9:3-5, we read: "And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven: and he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks." I accept this, too, as a true and accurate account.

John writes, in the Book of Revelation, "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet" — and later, "And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead" (Revelation 1:10, 17). I accept this account as well.

These passages tell us that people do, indeed, fall to the ground in the presence of God — a natural and fitting response, given the majestic holiness of God and the unworthiness of sinful humanity. What troubles me is this: when God chooses to reveal Himself to His people, does He wish them to become, in effect, as dead — entirely unaware of His presence? At the Transfiguration of Jesus, recorded in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Peter, John, and James were given a vision of the divinity of Christ. They were struck dumb with wonder, though Peter, impulsive as ever, did venture a proposal, perhaps hoping to prolong the vision. Mary Magdalene, and afterwards all eleven disciples, encountered Jesus repeatedly in His risen, glorified form, yet none of them was overwhelmed to the point of falling down as though dead. I would argue that those who perform "slaying in the Spirit" cannot themselves possess such divine power, nor are they entitled to use God's name to throw believing Christians to the ground. Our God is a God of compassion and love, who brings us a peace that passes all understanding — not fear, and not terror. He manifests Himself to whom He wishes, and allows us to receive Him, and to rest in the tranquillity of His majesty.

Jesus promised us His Holy Spirit. In Acts 2:1-4, we read: "And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance." That must surely have been the most powerful outpouring of the Holy Spirit the world has known — and yet not one of those present was "slain in the Spirit" that day. On the contrary, Jesus empowered them with spiritual power. Why, then, would the same Holy Spirit throw people to the ground when He moves among His faithful today?

The most important thing any Christian must keep in mind, when weighing spiritual matters, is that the Word of God remains our only rule of faith and practice. For too many Christians, personal spiritual experience is given priority over the written Word as the measure of doctrinal truth, and their own experience is made to validate Scripture, rather than Scripture being allowed to remain the true and final judge. This leaves such believers open to counterfeit spiritual experiences; the devil, a spiritual being, is well able to produce spiritual experiences among worshippers of every faith. Scripture itself calls these "signs and lying wonders" (2 Thessalonians 2:9). It is vital that Christians learn to be discerning in worship, lest they displease the very God they seek to honour, or be deceived, or allow themselves to be deceived, by unscrupulous persons.

The Holy Spirit is God the Spirit within the Triune Godhead, of one substance with God the Father and God the Son. He indwells every believer who has accepted Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord; it is not possible to possess more of the Holy Spirit than the person seated next to you in the pew. He is given to us by Jesus Christ, and no one may apportion or redistribute Him, in any form or measure. Scripture tells us plainly what to expect when the Holy Spirit manifests Himself: His purpose is to teach, to lead, to guide, to glorify Christ, and to bring God's word to our remembrance. Jesus promised that we would receive power when the Holy Spirit came (Acts 1:8), and, within the gathered congregation, He also manifests the gifts of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12) — always to profit all, since God is a God of purpose, and there is a purpose behind everything He does. If He gives a prophecy, it will benefit His people; if He manifests healing, His people will again be blessed. But who is blessed when someone merely falls to the ground, or is "slain in the Spirit"? Most who fall in this way rise again exactly as they were, with no change, physically or spiritually.

Certainly, genuine spiritual phenomena are to be expected in the life of a Christian, but we must examine such occurrences with diligence. Scripture gives many examples of false prophets who deceived people through displays of supposed spiritual power — the magicians of Egypt, for instance, who turned their rods into serpents, though their power was not of God. Thank God, then, that He has given us His Word, so that we have a standard by which to test what we see. It is only by weighing our experiences carefully against the principles set out in the Word of God that the true power or force behind them can be discerned.

Christian believers need great patience, perseverance, and a spirit of careful discernment. Churches that are ignorant of, or rebellious against, Scripture are not, in this, forming disciples of Jesus Christ, but are instead raising up a generation whose religious experience differs little from that found in countless pagan cults, ancient and modern alike.

Those who profess the Christian faith would do well to refrain from practices that undermine the very message of its Founder, Jesus Christ, God the Son. Rather than inducing mass collapse and hysterical laughter, our churches should be cultivating widespread repentance, and reverent worship. Amen.