

Shared spirit: Numbers 11:24-30

by [David L. Beck](#) in the [May 12, 1999](#) issue

*So Moses went out and told the people the words of the Lord; and he gathered seventy men of the elders of the people, and placed them round about the tent. Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the spirit that was upon him and put it upon the seventy elders; and when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did so no more.*

*Now two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the spirit rested upon them; they were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp. And a young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." And Joshua the son of Nun, the minister of Moses, one of his chosen men, said, "My lord Moses, forbid them." But Moses said to him, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put his spirit upon them!" And Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp.*

--Numbers 11:24-30

Moses had a problem with success. He had succeeded in setting a people free, but now he had to care for them. He had to tend to their immediate needs, such as food and water, and solve their conflicts and keep up their hopes. If there are only a few people involved, one person can do all this. When there are as many as there were Hebrews in Sinai, it is another matter.

In Exodus it is Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, who suggests to Moses that they appoint judges to share the work of settling conflicts. In the Book of Numbers, God tells Moses that after the elders of Israel gather away from the camp, he will take some of the spirit placed on Moses and put it on them, and "they shall bear the burden of the people with you so you do not bear it all by yourself."

The value of the Numbers story is the simple and clear explanation it gives for why the Spirit would ever be given to more than an exceptional person here and there. God intends the burden of service to be shared. The more who are empowered to serve, the greater the good that will be accomplished. As if to emphasize that very

simple insight, Moses refuses to support Joshua in his desire to stop Eldad and Medad, two "laymen" who were also inspired during the absence of the Elders to prophesy within the camp among the people. "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his spirit on them."

Luke's sweeping description of Pentecost in Acts 2:1-21 shows Moses' wish coming true: an entire community is inspired to proclaim the gospel to the entire world in various languages; all nations are part of a mission that is to extend to the ends of the earth.

Does receiving the Spirit mean everyone would serve in exactly the same way? How many people need to be preaching? If everyone preaches, then how do all those other tasks which have to do with caring for the people of God get done?

The practical genius of Paul is never more clear than in his observation that the Holy Spirit is universal for believers yet unique to the individual. God allows all who believe to be assured that their very faith is a sign of the Spirit empowering them. "No one can say, 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit," Paul said. To be a Christian is to believe in the miraculous. According to Paul, believing means confessing that one man who was executed is now Lord, in the face of all the contradictions and objections that can be raised. It is to have a faith that only the Holy Spirit can create within you.

Yet the presence of the Spirit means empowerment in a variety of gifts. Whatever helps to "share the burden of the people" can be counted as a gift.

Like the organs and members of the body, we are intended to be specialists, with God somehow coordinating the results. What all of us are inspired to do in our own special areas comes together in a way that advances the kingdom. That may be the most important miracle of all.

In *Christianizing the Roman Empire*, Ramsay MacMullen tries to explain Christian success from a secular viewpoint. He concludes that for the 250 years after Paul until Constantine's Edict of Toleration, Christianity grew primarily from the way Christians, who were socially marginal (e.g., house servants), shared the faith with pagan families in times of crisis. When those families took the risk of asking for help, a Christian "specialist" would appear. If a sick child was healed or some other crisis resolved, families would join the movement.

MacMullen also makes this provocative statement about missionary work: "After Saint Paul, the church had no mission, it made no organized or official approach to unbelievers, rather it left everything to the individual." On that "one on one" basis, he says, Christians gained a half million new converts each generation from 100 a.d. on.

Is this not the true Pentecost, the Pentecost Luke envisioned? Is it not the ability of anonymous people under threat of arrest or worse to use the opportunities God gave them to show the power of the Holy Spirit and thereby to spread the gospel? Is that not the wish of Moses coming true on a scale he never could have imagined?

If socially marginal people could do what they did simply because they trusted the Spirit, what can we do when we let the Spirit lead us?