



# Sensitive to the Holy Spirit

by Jonathan Aitken

**T**HE MOVEMENT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT is a controversial subject. Among some Pentecostals, Charismatics, and Evangelists it happens as regularly as holy clockwork, flattening or elevating entire congregations as they become prostrate or airborne with strange body movements and words spoken in tongues. Other Christian denominations are more circumspect about what theologians call pneumatology.

I have an amusing memory of interviewing the late Cardinal Avery Dulles about a Holy Spirit episode in 1992 when he and Charles W. Colson were discussing the setting up of a committee that later became known as Evangelicals and Catholics Together. During this inaugural discussion Colson suddenly discerned the presence of the Holy Spirit. As a result he rushed across to Richard John Neuhaus, the eminent Catholic priest and editor of *First Things*, embraced him warmly, and declared, "Together we can do this! You are my brother!" When I asked Avery Dulles for his recollection of this pneumatological incident there was a long pause. Eventually the cardinal cautiously replied: "I am afraid I am not quite as sensitive to the movements of the Holy Spirit as Chuck Colson!"

For most of my spiritual life I have been closer to Catholic caution than evangelical exuberance. For decades I was, at best, an occasional member of the church-reticent wing of Anglicanism, far more frozen than chosen. But then, against all my instincts and inclinations, I did encounter a life-changing experience of the power of the Holy Spirit. Other such profound moments have occasionally followed. But this summer I was in a couple of utterly different gatherings, two weeks and two worlds apart, at

which the Holy Spirit moved large audiences rather dramatically.

**T**HE FIRST OF THESE EPISODES took place in Nairobi in May at the Kenyan National Parliamentary Prayer Breakfast. I was the keynote speaker but my role was incidental. However, the timing and circumstances of the invitation were no coincidence.

Kenya is a tense country politically, perhaps on the edge of a precipice as it approaches next year's election. The parliamentary elite is deeply mistrusted by the voters for a multitude of reasons. Many of its members owe their seats to electoral fraud. They pay themselves exorbitant salaries. A Kenyan member of Parliament's annual pay is \$160,000—an outrageous sum for Africa, made worse by the poison of corruption and the assumption of impunity from due process of law. A darker shadow is cast by the memories of what happened at the last election. When certain party leaders found themselves dissatisfied by the widespread fraud at the polls, they launched their supporters into massacres that left more than 1,300 dead, 30,000 injured, and the country on the brink of civil war.

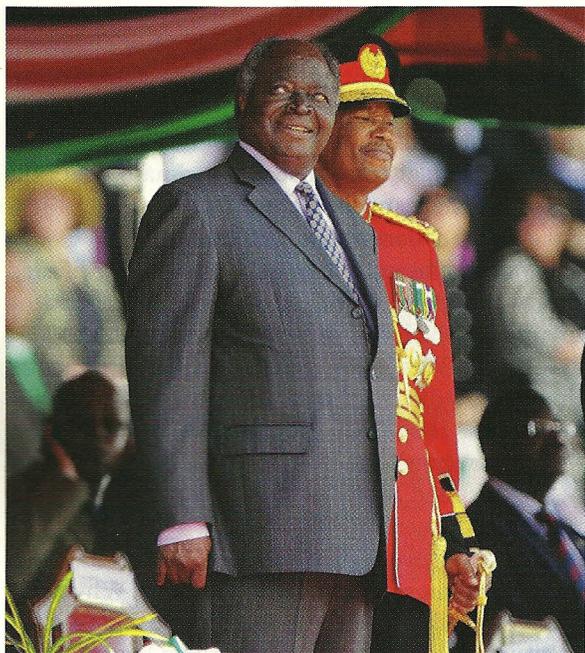
The International Criminal Court at The Hague has now summonsed but not yet indicted the politicians believed to be responsible for this slaughter. This has sent political Kenya into a time of tense waiting. When I got up to speak at the prayer breakfast you could have cut the atmosphere with a machete. This was because 80 percent of the audience (church people) believed the other 20 percent of the audience (MPs and ministers) ought to be in prison. So who better to address them, the organizers

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evidently thought, than an overseas cabinet minister who actually had been in prison?

Naturally I gave the speech my best shot, tackling some of the most obviously neuralgic issues such as impunity, corruption, contrition, and forgiveness. But the speaker was infinitely less important than the Spirit who descended in a most astonishing way on the proposer of the vote of thanks. He was Mwai Kibaki, the president of Kenya.

President Kibaki came to the podium looking and sounding every inch the patriarchal African leader. He is now in his eighties, with only a few more months in office before his final term expires. He



began with carefully scripted clichés about the state of the nation and the recovery of the economy. But then he put his notes aside and took off into a soaring flight of inspired spiritual oratory. Picking up the themes of the prayer breakfast he passionately appealed for an end to corruption and the beginning of a new era of national godliness. The 1,000-strong audience was visibly moved. They had expected to be bored by the usual anodyne platitudes delivered in votes of thanks on such occasions. Instead they were stirred by a national leader on fire with what many believed was the power of the Holy Spirit. Even the most skeptical journalists seemed to agree that something extraordinary had happened. As the headline in the next day's largest national newspaper trumpeted: PRESIDENT DECLARES—GOD IS THE ANSWER.

CHARLES W. COLSON has believed that God is the answer ever since his dramatic conversion in the middle of Watergate in 1973. At that time his critics poured cynicism on him by the bucketful. Thirty-eight years later, the cynics are largely silent. Sometimes (as in the case of the former CBS commentator Tom Braden) they sing the praises of the White House aide they loved to hate. This is because the ministry Colson founded, Prison Fellowship, has become one of the most influential and international Christian movements in the world.

Next month Chuck Colson will be celebrating his 80th birthday. He has probably delivered well over 20,000 evangelistic addresses to PF audiences, many of them in prisons. But I doubt he has ever given a finer or more Holy Spirit-inspired oration than his June address to the quadrennial Convocation of Prison Fellowship International in Toronto.

Since Colson was speaking extempore, there is no verbatim record of his remarks, which focused on the theme of man's justice, God's justice, and justification by faith. In any case, the lasting impression was not about what he said but what happened to the huge audience drawn from 135 countries.

Many of the delegates were tired from their international travels and did not have access to interpreters. But they rose in their seats to cheer and be cheered by the dramatic intensity of Colson's message, which seemed to come from some higher force above those of us listening. It felt like St. Paul's exhortation to the Romans to be "aglow with the Spirit, serving the Lord" (Romans 12:11). Those last three words kept our feet on the ground, for the practical disciplines of service to Christ through prison ministry are an anchor that prevents genuine spiritual enthusiasm from turning into unreal charismatic fireworks.

That said, many seasoned participants at the PFI Convocation felt that they had witnessed the power of the Holy Spirit surging through the conference hall when Colson was speaking. It was a profound experience, and for me a second summer reminder that God keeps on moving in mysterious ways to perform His wonders—whether in Nairobi or in Toronto. ❧

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