

The Holy Spirit and His Gifts

(1 Corinthians 12:1-11)

The History

When Pentecostalism first made an appearance in Britain – at All Saints Bradford in 1907 – its meetings soon hit the national press with headlines such as: ‘Strange Revivalist Scenes – Vicar’s Child Talks Chinese!’ In America a year or two earlier the first Pentecostal centre was an old dilapidated Methodist chapel at 312 Azusa Street in Los Angeles. All kinds of bizarre things happened there: people spoke in tongues, shouted out, jumped, swayed, fell to the ground lying motionless for perhaps hours (‘slain in the spirit’) and so on.

What was Pentecostalism’s basic teaching? That an experience like that of the apostles at the first Christian Pentecost awaits every believer and is normally accompanied by speaking in tongues. It is known as ‘baptism in the Holy Spirit’. The Pentecostalists formed their own new denominations, such as the Assemblies of God.

The Charismatic Renewal, which shared this same basic belief, started in the Episcopal Church of America in the 1960s and spread to other denominations. Some members later formed separate House Churches, while others remained in the mainline denominations, attending from time-to-time special services where the *charismata*, the gifts of the Holy Spirit were exercised. I guess some of you have attended such meetings and been amazed, and perhaps felt somewhat intimidated by what went on there. I have.

Our Epistle today

It seems that, among the charismatic gifts, speaking in tongues, was particularly valued by some members of the Corinthian church, but this was causing rivalry and upset. In a large section of 1 Corinthians, chs.12-14 St. Paul wishes to bring the situation under control:

- First (12:4-11) he stresses time and again that all the gifts come from the **same Spirit**. They are for the common good – and therefore should not cause rivalry.
- He goes on to say (12:12-31) that, on the contrary, the church is meant to be like a **body** where all the limbs and organs, by doing their different jobs, contribute to the success of the whole. No-one must think themselves better or worse than anyone else, and all should care for each other.
- In ch.13 Paul shows how this caring should operate in his great hymn of **love**.
- Finally, in ch.14 (especially vv.26-33) gets down to the nitty gritty of how charismatic worship should be in an orderly way.... What would he have made of the Azusa Street bedlam?! His whole emphasis is on only doing what will **build people up** spiritually. So, he far prefers prophecy to tongues, because though it people will hear clear messages from God, whereas tongues are quite meaningless to all - unless they are interpreted.

The Charismatic Gifts

- *The utterance of wisdom* – a wise message from God. By wisdom we know the true value of things.
- *The utterance of knowledge* – clearly *supernatural* knowledge. I heard of a man who attended a meeting after a row with his wife. A message came from a stranger that he must put that right – and he went and phoned his wife and did so.

- *Faith* – not the ordinary faith we all have, that enables us to say the Creed, but ‘faith that will move mountains’, such as that of George Muller in Bristol in the 19th C. He supported up to 2000 children in his orphanages. He and others prayed and trusted God to move people to make voluntary gifts in cash and kind. He did...!
- *Gifts of healings* (so Gk) – clearly a variety of healings. The Rev. John Huggett who has spent many years in healing ministry with his wife writes: ‘Spiritual gifts do not belong to any one individual; they belong to Christ and His Church. They are not permanent possessions but momentary manifestations.’¹ And he likens the healer etc to a postman passing on parcels to people!
- *Working of miracles* – perhaps exorcism or even occasionally raising the dead. Smith Wigglesworth, a poor plumber, who received the baptism of the Spirit at All Saints Bradford, is said to have raised 14 from death.
- *Prophecy* – a prophet is one who speaks on behalf of God, uttering messages of challenge or encouragement, sometimes disclosing people’s secret thoughts.
- *Discernment of spirits* – seems to refer here to discerning whether the prophetic messages delivered are true or false (cf. 14:29).
- *Various kinds of tongues* – speaking in languages the speaker has never learnt and does not understand. It can bring great private blessing to the speaker (14:4).
- *Interpretation of tongues* – There’s so much we don’t understand here, but have to trust this can be genuine. In July 1972 I attended a great service in Guildford cathedral. There was much concern at that time that moral standards in society were slipping badly; pornography was becoming readily available. Mrs Mary Whitehouse started the Nationwide Festival of Light in protest. At this service a RC charismatic priest preached quietly but movingly saying he believed God had not taken his hand off this nation and wanted to take it and make it a jewel in his diadem, but we must be quiet before him in prayer. We were – for a short time – then a loud guttural message in tongues came from near the front. I thought, “How dreadful! God was in the silence.” When it finished the leader of the service spoke forcefully in English at the microphone, “I have heard your prayer and am not taking my hand off this nation. I do wish to take it and make it a jewel in my diadem, and I am working even now secretly in high places.” We were amazed and really felt in God’s presence.

What shall we do?

If we deeply wish to be of more use in God’s service, we can pray ourselves and ask others to pray for us to be filled with the Holy Spirit for this (cf. Eph.5:18). If we feel we would like any of these gifts, again we must ask God, probably repeatedly (cf. Lk.11:9, 13). I once wanted the gift of tongues; people prayed for me but I didn’t receive it. Someone later said, “Say nonsense words and it will come”, but I would not do that. Then I became much more interested in divine healing, read about it and, in my last parish, formed a healing team and we prayed, usually two by two, at healing services and in people’s homes. Although people didn’t always get all the healing they asked for, they always received some blessing.

Let us pray

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¹ *Preach and Heal*, p.76.

