

SPIRITUAL GIFTS: MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

About three years ago, in FR 82, I facetiously sub-titled it “My Final Answer” to questions about the role of the Holy Spirit. Well, this is a revision of that article giving my “final answer” at this point in my learning, adapted to fit the current series.

Rather than being a history of the universe or the nations, the Bible is the history of God’s working to bring Christ into the world that he might call all mankind back to him as one spiritual community. He called out Abraham and Israel, identifying, guiding, and empowering them through his Spirit. Their nation was not the goal of God’s plan. In fact, their kingdom was not in God’s plan but was a form of rebellion! (1 Sam. 8:4-9). Their nation was only a means through which would be fulfilled the promise to Abraham that in him all the families, or nations, of the earth would be blessed.

God’s identifying and empowering Spirit would, in time, point to all nations indicating the inclusion of “all flesh” as his called out people. Seven or eight centuries before Christ came, Joel wrote, “*And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh*” (Joel 2:28). Peter interpreted Joel’s “afterward” as “in the last days” (Acts 2:17). The “last days” was the period of about forty years in which the Holy Spirit identified and empowered the inauguration of the spiritual kingdom including all flesh as it superseded the national kingdom of the circumcised flesh. This would be the culmination, the end, the completion, the perfection of what Bible history is about. The Book of recorded redemptive history would close at that point.

Jesus assured his disciples that they would “*see the kingdom of God come with power*” (Mark 9:1). This power would confirm “*that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem*” (Luke 24:47-48). They were instructed to remain in the city until they were clothed with that power from on high. They would be witnesses. These points are repeated in Luke’s record of Acts 1:1-8. The power is identified as baptism with the Holy Spirit. After that empowering, they would be witnesses radiating from Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth -- inclusive of all flesh, across all racial, national, and gender lines.

Religious systems do not change readily. Although the change was inaugurated on Pentecost, God used about forty years to culminate it, reminiscent of the forty years between crossing the Red Sea and the Jordan. The change had to begin at its very center, in Jerusalem among Jews. The Passover and Pentecost observances depicted what the Jewish religion was all about. If the Jewish priests and leaders who had called out for the crucifixion had received a visible, demonstrable outpouring of the Holy Spirit on either or both of those holy days, that would have been a fatal blow to Jesus’ claims. Instead, the Spirit raised Jesus from the dead and then visibly and audibly distinguished and empowered Jesus’ disciples at those feast times.

Residents from many nations were present on Pentecost, but they were all Jews or proselytes. Though Peter quoted Joel in saying God would pour out his Spirit upon all flesh in the last days, it was not actually happening at that time. The Spirit had begun with believing Jews, identifying them as included in his spiritual nation -- "*beginning in Jerusalem.*" The word of the Lord would go from Jerusalem (Isa. 2:1-4). No subsequent converts could claim independence from them as a separate body. We dealt with that in our former essay, FR 204, "*Spirit-Created Unity.*"

Again, let us observe that the Holy Spirit did not save anyone. The Spirit came on some before baptism and on some afterward to testify that all flesh was acceptable. That witness was most needed in those transitional years of the "last days." On Pentecost, Peter associated Joel's prophecy of the Spirit with the shaking of their present system "*before the day of the Lord come, the great and manifest / terrible day.*" When Jesus came with power and great glory in that long anticipated "*coming of the Lord,*" he brought fulfillment of the prophecies against Jewish nationalism, thus nullifying any claim or hope that the spiritual kingdom must bear marks of Judaism. The Spirit bore witness to that. "*There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus*" (Gal. 3:28).

The visible manifestations of God's Spirit enabling miraculous demonstrations were not given to each disciple in those last days, nor do disciples now possess them. The purpose and duration of those gifts were mentioned to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 1:4-8): "*I give thanks to God always for you because of the grace of God which is given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him with all speech and all knowledge -- even as the testimony to Christ was confirmed among you -- so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ; who will sustain you to the end, faultless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.*" Please read that reference slowly noting the full meaning.

How could they or anyone else have learned the message of Christ had there been none qualified by the Spirit to teach them? They exercised those gifts as they awaited the imminent return of Christ. In his farewell discourses, Jesus was preparing his apostles for his leaving. He assured them that they would not be left as helpless orphans, ignorant and powerless. He promised to send the Spirit to sustain them. He would bear witness of him, refresh their memories of his teaching, guide them into all truth, convict the world, and declare things to come. Read John 14, 15, and 16 with special attention to 14:26; 15:26; and 16:13-14. Those promises were not made to you and me. They were made to the apostles. The indwelling of the Spirit was given to all as they were baptized.

All obedient believers received, and still receive, the gift of the indwelling Spirit of God, but all did not receive gifts of special powers or functions. Read Ephesians 4 with special attention to verse 11 onward: "*And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers...*" These persons were given "supernatural" gifts, powers, and functions as the Spirit worked through them. Elders could bring healing to the sick (James 5:13f). Adding to their knowledge of what was already written in old covenant Scriptures, God revealed special messages through both

male and female prophets. Paul explained, “*For we know in part and we prophecy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears*” (1 Cor. 13:9 NIV). Teachers depended upon inspiration rather than written New Covenant Scriptures, for these were in formative stage at best.

Continuing with Paul in Ephesians 4:11f, he stated the purpose of those special gifts so needed in the infancy and maturing of the church: “*.for the equipment of the saints, for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, etc.*” Unless the body of Christ was to remain in infancy perpetually, those special gifts would not be needed continuously. Unless revelation would always be fragmentary, endowed spokesmen would no longer fill a need. If God’s plan to bring all flesh together in one body was completed, confirmed, and consummated in maturity, no more predictive utterances would be expected. All would have been fulfilled.

With emphasis upon the functioning of the body, Paul elaborated further on the gifts and functions facilitated by the Spirit, but he would show “*a still more excellent way*” (1 Cor 12). That more excellent way was to be “love-driven” rather than “Spirit-driven!” Spiritual gifts were temporary; love never ends. “*For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away*” (Ch. 13). The stage of imperfection would give way to maturity. The grown man does not require things a child is dependent upon.

What is “the perfect” or “that which is perfect?” This has been debated through the many years of my study. My original tutoring declared it to be the completion of the new covenant Writings. That is not to be ruled out as an element in the whole picture but it falls short of filling it all.

In defining “perfect” Vine says “teleios” signifies having reached its end (telos), finished, complete, perfect. It is used of persons primarily of physical development, then with ethical import, fully grown, mature. What was coming to completion, maturity, etc. in those “last days”? All of Bible history focuses on this point in time and events. God had called Abraham through whom to bless all nations. He had separated a nation through whom the Savior would come. His Son had come and inaugurated his spiritual kingdom open to all peoples. He had ascended into the Holy of Holies to present his sacrifice of atonement, awaiting a return after a period of transition from national Israel to spiritual Israel. He had sent his Spirit to identify all his “called out” as one body. He had given enabling gifts in this time of infancy of his body to instruct and guide it, which gifts would no longer be essential to the mature church. When he returned in judgment against Jerusalem and what it represented, God’s dwelling would become with man in his new Temple perfected by the atonement of Christ. Thus the special mission of the Holy Spirit in the “last days” would be fulfilled. That which is perfect would have come.

No longer does any man receive revelations or inspired messages, nor do we need such. Many have claimed to receive new revelations only to be proven wrong. No man has a gift of miracles, though we hear anecdotal stories of them all the time. No man can exercise an empowerment to heal the sick in spite of claims that many make. The so-called healers never bring before the cameras a person like Christopher Reeves. No comatose person hooked up to a ventilator is seen to awake, discard the artificial devices, get up, and walk out of the hospital room. No amputated limb is re-attached. No person whose face is eaten away by cancer is restored on site. The healers display the persons who can be affected by the increased adrenaline flow caused by excitement or who are susceptible to the hypnotic influence of the manipulators. I have waited for a lifetime to see one indisputable case and am still waiting. That mission of the Holy Spirit was completed in the first century.

Am I denying the Presence and the Power of the Spirit of God today? No. I am denying that He empowers with special gifts. He indwells the disciple. God's promise to hear and answer prayers is still valid, but that is not a spiritual gift. His answers are not as obvious as a miracle performed by one who had a supernatural gift, but they are discerned more by faith than by demonstration. Spiritual endowments were never given to all disciples, but the door of prayer is opened to all alike.

"That which is perfect" was perfected when the imperfect was taken away nineteen centuries ago as Joel predicted (Acts 2:16-21). The first heaven and first earth passed away giving place for the new heaven and new earth which came down from God then. So I propose this as the final / completed / fully mature / perfect answer!!

"Peace and mercy be upon all who walk by this rule, upon the Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16).

(Cecil Hook: March 2004). []