

Spiritual Gifts: One More Time

Several months ago I received the letter copied below from one who describes himself as formerly being “Church of Christ” but is now serving as a priest in the Catholic Church. It is in response to my FR 82, ““Last Days’ Mission of Holy Spirit.” I do not recall having responded to him; neither shall this be directed to him. So I will not reveal his identity. His sincere attitude is evident even as I hope mine will be. His letter reveals a number of aspects which, in my judgment, are misunderstood by many people.

“I am quite shocked by your view on the role and work of the Holy Spirit. Have you studied the evidence of the first 3 or 4 centuries of the early Church? The apostolic and early church fathers give clear statements about the continued role and work of the third member of the Trinity. I would suggest looking into the history of the church some more. The very movement which birthed the church of Christ was wrought with “charismatic” overtones. Cane Ridge with Barton W. Stone is a clear example. The Church of Jesus Christ is not powerless. It is animated by the very spirit of God. We are the “Body of Christ”. Christ is Supernatural, so are we. I agree that much of what we see in evangelical charismatic circles is suspect at best, but we must be very careful of “throwing out the baby with the bath water”. The Church catholic, East and West, has always known the presence and active work of the Holy Spirit. It is a fact. I respectfully request that you reinvestigate your claim. I can speak to this because I used to be Church of Christ. I was “disfellowshipped” for believing in an “actual indwelling” instead of a “figurative indwelling”. What the Elders of that small CofC were supporting was heresy from the 3rd Cen. Pelagianism (A “pull yourself up by your own bootstraps” mentality). It started me on a journey that ended in me finding the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of the first Millennium. I am home. Thank you for your time dear brother. May God Bless you in your quest for truth.”

Even though my former article reveals clearly that I accept the indwelling and work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of disciples today, as I have taught consistently, ever so often someone insists that I do not believe in the power of the Spirit in our lives. They fail to make the distinction between the indwelling of the Spirit and the special “supernatural” gifts supplied to enable the initiation of the spiritual kingdom as it superseded the national kingdom in the approximate forty-year period from the ministry of Jesus until his “parousia” in the events culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem. Nobody receives those powers to do miraculous things today.

Every obedient person receives the life-giving gift of the Spirit at the time of baptism (Acts 2:28). All who received the Spirit were not empowered by special gifts. “And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers...” (Eph. 4:11). Paul wrote a whole chapter correcting misinformation about spiritual gifts concluding with rhetorical questions, “Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?” (1 Cor. 12:29-31). No persons demonstrate those signs today.

Paul, as an empowered apostle, could claim as none can now, “The signs of a true apostle were performed among you in all patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works” (2 Cor. 12:12). Who can restore life to the dead as Paul did to Eutychus? What spokesman for God (prophet) can reveal new messages from God? Who can turn water to wine, restore a dismembered body, or heal a severed spinal cord? Who can teach in a language he never learned? Who can interpret an unfamiliar language? Such powers could be demonstrated, and we know that no one can demonstrate them. The “proofs” offered today for such miraculous claims are anecdotal and subjective.

All disciples alike are encouraged to pray for God to work for good in our lives, but no person is empowered by the Spirit to bring those things about. Miraculous works were evident instantaneously; answer to prayers are less obvious. We walk by faith, not by sight (2 Cor. 5:7). It would require no faith to accept things proven to the physical senses, but less visible evidence of answers to our prayers must be interpreted through faith. For example, the healing of the sick might be by natural causes or by God’s intervention. Though we are not able to discern the difference, we can thank God for it by faith.

It is a bit of a stretch to say the charismatic Cane Ridge revival gave birth to the Church of Christ because of Barton W. Stone’s participation in it. It was the promotion of unity in that meeting which was the driving force which helped launch a new movement, and the Church of Christ was a splinter group developing generations later which is far from charismatic..

Even though church fathers of the early centuries claimed the continued work of the Holy Spirit through gifts, their evidence is just as anecdotal and subjective as present-day claims. They do not prove the case.

For the Holy Spirit to have been active in the “Church Catholic, East and West” (Greek and Roman) would indicate divine leading and approval of the Great Schism, the division into two churches antagonistic toward each other. Division is not a fruit of the Spirit but a work of the flesh (Gal. 5:16-24). That truth applies to all divisions.

It is widely agreed that the Spirit indwells the disciple and works in less apparent manner. Why, then, have some claimed to have possessed and exercised the special, demonstrative gifts through the centuries, even as some claim today? The answer is evident: It is a grasp for authenticity. Desiring to teach and/or practice things not taught in the Scriptures or to impose their interpretation of them, they bolster their authenticity by claim of direct revelation and divine approval. Such authentication is critical to the development of the papacy, splinter groups, new religions, and cults.

There is no evidence in the Scriptures that the apostles might have successors who also had their special gifts, and that would include claims of the primacy of Peter and successors as vicars of Christ. Without those claims of succession, the hierarchy headed by the papacy could not have developed with any degree of credibility. Through those claims, however,

the concept of the church (hierarchy) being the Living Voice was developed, which demands that through the centuries God has had men of apostolic endowment through whom he has continued to reveal his will by making changes to and adding to what is taught in the Scriptures. God did not guide the original twelve into all the truth, as he promised, but continues to do that through the Living Voice expressed ultimately through the popes who were given infallibility.

This development was a self-authenticating system. It could make rules and regulations which made it totalitarian in power. The development of the sacramental system was a tool to bring every believer under the power of the papacy, for salvation was available only through the sacraments which could be administered only through the hierarchy which included the priesthood. The individual or nation excommunicated was supposedly cut off from the means of life and heaven. Even when the power of the papacy was being threatened by bishops who passed their offices on to their sons in independence from the popes, the Living Voice stopped that practice by demanding celibacy of the priesthood.

This development of power, supposedly directed by the Holy Spirit, took centuries. In time, Innocent III (1198-1216) claimed to be Vicar of Christ, Vicar of God and Supreme Sovereign of the Church and the World. Also, that all things on earth and in heaven and in hell are subject to the Vicar of Christ.

Power corrupts. Corruption became the rule rather than the exception. The apostles were filled with the Spirit; hence, any who claimed to be successors should also bear the fruits of the Spirit. But many of them were guilty of unspeakable sins and atrocities. For a brief review of their corrupt lives and hideous crimes, read the "Church History" section of Henry H. Halley's "Pocket Bible Handbook." Where was the Holy Spirit in all this?

Recently, I received two unsolicited booklets from a man in The Netherlands. He begins, "I have written this little book in obedience to the command which I received from the King of the Kingdom of Heaven. It contains passages of extreme importance which the Lord has kept hidden until this present time when He revealed them to me." In the second booklet he states, "All mysteries and revelations that are in here have been directly received from God by me. This booklet is undoubtedly the most important written work that you have come across." I have not read his material, but it is another effort of one trying to authenticate his message by claims of revelation -- a spiritual gift.

Most every religion and cult, as far as I can ascertain, claims authentication by special gifts from God or the Holy Spirit. They are founded upon messages supposedly revealed and supported by miraculous signs. So to which messenger shall we listen -- "The Living Voice," Mohammed, Joseph Smith, David Koresh, the man in The Netherlands, or the preacher who claims, "God put this on my heart to tell you"? We cannot listen to them all because they conflict with each other.

If there are a dozen messengers who claim direction of the Holy Spirit and only one is telling the truth, of what value is that to us? It would only lead us into more confusion.

We must depend upon the special gift of discerning the spirits, you say? How can we tell which claimant actually can discern the spirits since they disagree? So that is not a satisfactory answer.

Call me simplistic (or a plain simpleton) if you please, but we must go back to the sufficiency of the Scriptural message which was delivered by men endowed with Spiritual gifts. Exercising the authenticating signs of apostles with Spiritual endowments, they proclaimed the gospel by which believers were saved, thus forming the church. Also, they delivered God's message to the infant church for a sufficient guide as the kingdom of heaven succeeded the earthly religious-political kingdom of Israel. Because God's will is made known fully through their messages, it is unchanging and, hence, there is no need for the Holy Spirit to function now in that manner though he lives in us individually. No new ritual or obligation is required of us than was specified by the apostles.

(Cecil Hook, January 2002) []