

Gifts of the Spirit

Have you heard of post-ascension pre-Pentecost Christianity? This is the Christianity of the disciples after the ascension of Jesus. They knew all the facts because they had been taught by Jesus and they were eyewitnesses of his life. They were true believers. They met together with each other and they prayed. Yet the surprising thing was that Jesus told them not to go out and spread the good news at that time because there was something missing. That "something" was the Holy Spirit. Only after the coming of the Holy Spirit were they to begin their task of spreading the good news. Why was this?

To answer this question we must think of the role the church was to play. Jesus had said to them "As the Father has sent me so send I you". When Jesus came to earth he had two tasks. One was to die for the sins of the world. This was a unique task which no one else had part in. However his other task was to reveal God's love and call people back to God. This task the church was to continue. In fact later on the apostle Paul called the church the Body of Christ. The church was to be continuing Christ's work on earth. This means they had to live like Jesus, speak like Jesus and act like Jesus. In order to do this they needed to have in them the same Spirit as was in Jesus. This was the Holy Spirit. Therefore Jesus told them to wait for the Holy Spirit.

This is what makes the church truly Christ's body on earth - that every member has within him or her the Spirit of Christ and therefore, lives, speaks and acts like Jesus to some extent. I say "to some extent" because we are not perfect vessels of the Holy Spirit, so even if he is perfect, the result of his speaking through us is imperfect, unlike Jesus who was the perfect vessel and thus perfectly revealed God to the world.

Studying church history is one of my favourite hobbies. In the past year I have read hundreds of pages of the writings of the early church father both from books and from the internet. It has been fascinating to learn of the development of the church in the first 300 hundred years especially. Lots of wonderful things happened but unfortunately there was also a negative development that resulted in a church very different from the New Testament church. By around 350 AD the church was a part of the state organisation run by professionals who were state officials. It was no longer expected that ordinary church members should be active channels of the Holy Spirit. Only the church officials could be these channels. In general the church became a tightly controlled state organisation.

This pattern continued almost unbroken for 1200 years until the reformation. Only with Luther and others did a process begin which slowly restored basic New Testament truths to the practice of the church. This was a process and is still going on now. It generally happened in the way that someone re-discovered some truth from the Bible and ended up founding a new denomination. The bad thing about this was that all the different aspects of truth got split up among many denominations and often people were fighting with each other about these truths. This created a very negative view of the Protestant church. However in recent years there has been a significant improvement as denominations have been willing to learn from each other and have come to a common understanding of the truth. Alpha is a good example of this.

The truths about the Holy Spirit have also led to different denominations. In the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century there were denominations that started emphasising the work of the Holy Spirit to help us to live like Jesus, this is where holiness denominations like the Nazarenes had their roots. Others emphasised the work of the Holy Spirit to speak like Jesus or to act like him, which is where the Pentecostal church and the Charismatic movement have come from.

I first made my own personal commitment to Jesus in 1968 soon after I started at university. The following year someone loaned me a book about the Holy Spirit. It was really interesting because I had not heard anything about the gifts of the Spirit before. I started reading this book and carried on page after page until I got to a chapter in which it described how we can ask the Holy Spirit into our lives to fill us. It also told that the Spirit can give us gifts to help us serve God. The most common gift is the ability to speak in a language given by the Spirit. I asked God fill me with the Holy Spirit to give me this gift of tongues. To my amazement I then found I had the ability to speak in a new language. It confirmed to me that the Holy Spirit really was in my life.

Several weeks later I experienced for the first time God wanting to speak through me in English to give a message to some one. This I understood to be what the Bible calls prophecy. It is now 30 years since the time I first experienced the gifts of the Spirit. I am so thankful to the Lord that every day since then except one I have been able to pray to him in this new language he gave me.

The one day I did not have this gift was when I asked God to remove it from me for 24 hours to prove it really was from him and not something I was making up. He did just that. For 24 hours I could not speak in tongues and after that time the gift was restored. I made this special request because there was someone who was saying that this gift was not from God and I wanted to be sure I was not making it up.

Then in the beginning of 1995 I experienced the power of the Holy Spirit in a new way. I found him touching my life so strongly that sometimes I could not remain standing. I also found that often when I prayed for others the Spirit strongly touched them. This continued for about a year and a half. Since then this power of the Holy Spirit has become much less evident than before. Once again it has been a confirmation for me that the power is from God because I did not invent it when it happened and now I cannot make it happen even if I want to. I just have to be patient for God's timetable.

As I have studied church history I have come to understand that the Holy Spirit's presence seems to come and go in waves. When a wave comes it can be very strong, as in the Great Awakening in America in the 1730s or in the Welsh revival in 1904, or in many countries in 1994 - 1996, or as it is now in Pensacola. But these waves generally last for only a short time, a few months or years. One reason is that physically our bodies cannot stand the strong presence of the Holy Spirit for very long. We easily get burned up by the power. When a wave comes we need to go with it like good surfers, but when it goes we must carry on swimming.

The gifts of the Spirit don't come and go in the same way as the big waves of power. In my case the gift of tongues has been there for 30 years, but the power to exercise the gifts does seem to vary depending on how strongly the Holy Spirit is showing his presence.

One question that many people ask is how they can receive and use gifts of the Spirit. In principle it is very easy, especially with the gift of tongues, which usually acts as a doorway to the other gifts just as it did on the day of Pentecost. You just confess to the Lord any sin that you know is between you and him and then you ask him to release in you the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Then you open your mouth and start to thank him in the new language that you find he has given you.

Notice that I say that you have to speak. People often make the mistake of thinking that God will suddenly overwhelm them with a great feeling so that they burst out in a new tongue. I agree that this can happen, especially in times when there is a strong manifestation of the Spirit going on as happened at Pentecost or when the Pentecostal movement was born in 1906 in Azusa street. But at other times there is no strong feeling and it is wrong for people to try to work up feelings. In my case in 1969 I was alone in my student room, I had no special feeling, it was all very quiet. One minute I had no ability to speak in tongues, next minute after I had prayed for this gift I found that when I opened my mouth and began to speak, out came a new language.

What do you do if you pray and nothing happens? If you have prayed for this gift alone, go and get some one to pray for you. If someone has prayed for you, go and pray alone. It sometimes happens that people find they receive the gift of tongues in the bath or when they are just waking up because then they are more relaxed. For other people the process is more difficult. Let me explain why.

The Holy Spirit lives in our hearts if we are Christians. Paul says that by definition a Christian has the Holy Spirit in him or her. A gift of the Holy Spirit is when the Spirit in us does something through us from the inside out. But what if there are many walls between the inside of us and our mind and mouth and body? This happens in the case that we have had psychological hurts as children. It also happens if we have inhibitions and learned to be nice polite people and squeeze down all our feelings inside as many of Christians have learned. It is also true if we have learned to do everything by our own effort and not learned to rest in God.

The result is that we have programmed into us an instinct to suppress what is inside. This instinct causes us unconsciously to suppress the flow of the Spirit from within as well as everything else. In that case when we ask to be given the gifts of the Spirit nothing may happen at first. Some people make the mistake of thinking that God has rejected them or that that they must try harder with their own efforts. This is wrong. God loves each of us. The Holy Spirit lives in us. The problem is how he can get out from inside us to fill our life and manifest himself through us. Of course if we do not ask him to do this he will not do it because he does not generally force his presence on people. But if we ask him then he has to begin a process of removing the inner blocks.

In Turku where I live there is a river running through the centre of the city. In winter this usually becomes frozen over. In spring time the ice begins to melt but nothing much shows until suddenly one day all the ice remaining in the river is swept out to

sea. This can be true in us. We can be frozen inside. When we ask the Holy Spirit to work through us, he begins to thaw the ice inside but that may be a long process. We may need help from others who understand inner healing, we may need to start writing in a journal or reading and praying to learn more of what God wants for our lives. There may be sins to repent of. These can be all part of the process of thawing. For a time we may not see anything much happening until one day there will be a movement inside and the ice will move and be carried away by the current of the river of living water flowing from within. Then the gifts of the Spirit will start to become visible. Our part is to be faithful in seeking the Lord and listening to him so that the thawing process can go on and not stop.

Once the Spirit is able to flow through us then it is usually easier to co-operate with him in the future and more can flow. Tongues can lead to prophecy or interpretation or word of wisdom or knowledge. These in turn can lead to healing.

To conclude: God's plan is that we the church should live like Jesus, speak like him and act like him. The Holy Spirit has been given to make this possible but if he is shut inside us due to ignorance, self-will, sin or inner hurts, God's plan will not be fulfilled in us and he has to use others. I think our goal should be to give the Holy Spirit freedom to do as much in us as he can and not limit him to just one way of working. We need him to sanctify us to live like Jesus. We need him to flow through us to enable us to speak like Jesus through the verbal gifts of the Spirit and to act like Jesus through the power gifts of the Spirit. Whichever phase in the process you are, I would encourage you not to give up but to co-operate with his work in your life until the breakthrough comes.

Remember also that each breakthrough should be a stepping-stone to the next. We should not be content with one experience of the Holy Spirit but seek him to do more and more so that we can reveal more of Jesus in this world.

Copyright
Graham Turner
(around the year 2000)