

The Mystery of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit in the 21st Century

Lecture 9

The doctrine of the Holy Spirit is one of the most debated topics in Christianity today. Is the Holy Spirit baptising people with special empowerment as a separate experience to salvation? Is the phenomenon of speaking in tongues the sign of this empowerment? Is the Holy Spirit equipping people to be miracle workers and faith healers today? Is the Holy Spirit revealing specific messages – messages that are supplementary to the Bible— to people through prophecy?

As we learned last week, these questions have only begun to be asked in the last 120 years. Prior to that, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit was not a point of dispute. But this changed when, in 1901, a woman named Agnes from Topeka KS began speaking in tongues whilst seeking absolute personal holiness. Five years later, the Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles brought this phenomenon to the attention of the mass media . . . and it has spread around the world like wildfire.

In the 21st century, most evangelicals, and many Roman Catholics, now seek and practice the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit. If a vote were taken on this doctrine, those who believe in it would outnumber those who don't.

At this point, we need to re-examine history to help us further understand why this movement has accelerated so quickly around the world, and we also need to define some categories of understanding.

The Philosophical Background to the Movement

Last week we briefly surveyed church history as it pertains to the Pentecostal/charismatic movement. We noted that the Great Awakenings of the 18th and 19th centuries stirred a personal and individualistic character to Christianity. "Altar calls" were common – urging people to "accept Jesus as 'personal' Saviour". Strong appeals to walk in personal holiness were answered by many, and even governments became involved by legislating away evils such as alcohol (i.e. prohibition).

Camp meetings and evangelistic campaigns were popular. These were quite often emotional affairs, with people crying out in repentance and being exuberant in Christian joy. Soon these "mountain top" experiences became the standard by which spirituality was measured. "Hot" Christians were holy Christians . . . but lukewarm or cold Christians were backslidden and obviously beset by hidden sin.

The experience of Christian faith, not the doctrinal substance of it, was now the gauge of genuine belief. Not surprisingly, speaking in tongues, miracles, healings and prophecy emerged as objective proof of spirituality.

These developments within the church, however, were not the only factors at work setting the stage for Pentecostalism. In the general population, too, conditions were right for an individualistic, experiential form of truth. The Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries, which promised utopia through scientific advancement, was not satisfying the masses. Also known as the Age of Reason,

the Enlightenment cast doubts on all kinds of faith, and looked to human discoveries and inventions to bring in a new age of leisure and peace.

But it didn't work. Reason replaced conscience, machines replaced people, and scientific discoveries were more effective destroying life than saving it (i.e. the atomic bomb). Rather than utopia, the Enlightenment gave us two World Wars and unspeakable horror.

Philosophically, there was a reaction in the 19th and 20th centuries. This reaction was called Existentialism, which, while retaining the doubts the Enlightenment put on religious dogma, bought into an experiential, individualistic form of truth. Suddenly, truth was relative – neither revelation (i.e. the Bible) nor reason (i.e. science) were the absolute standard. Now personal experience and intuition were preferred paths to knowledge.

These philosophical movements have names other than Enlightenment and Existentialism that are more commonly used today. Enlightenment thinking is what we call Modernism or Modernity. It is also called secular humanism. Existentialism-type thinking is what we call Post-Modernism or Post-Modernity.

So . . . at the same time that Western society in general was discontent with absolute propositional truth (i.e. laws, whether biblical or scientific, that apply to all people at all places and at all times) and was looking instead to personal experiences, Christianity, too, was seeking the same.

The Pentecostal/charismatic movement supplied the very thing people – both believers and unbelievers – were craving. Immediate, intuitive and experiential truth.

Does this mean, then, that this movement represents progress beyond the movements that preceded it? Is it an improvement over the pre-Enlightenment age (the age of revelation, which is also called the Dark Ages)? Is it an improvement over the Enlightenment itself? There's certainly nothing scientific about tongues, miracles, healings and prophecy. Is it an improvement over Existentialism, in the sense that Pentecostalism/charismaticism still uses the Bible and calls people to faith in Jesus as Saviour and Lord?

Is the fact that the movement has become so large evidence that it is right?

How do we answer those questions? Where do we look? I believe we must seek answers in the Bible alone . . . and there are many who would argue that this is a mistake. "That's going back to the pre-Enlightenment era! Do you mean to return us to the Dark Ages?" they would say. No. The Bible was not the problem in the Dark Ages; the organised Church was. When the Church ceased to teach and obey the Bible, that is when dissatisfaction settled in.

God has given us the Bible as the absolute and undisputed standard of truth. Jesus Himself identified it as such: "Sanctify them by Thy truth; Thy Word is truth" (John 17.17). The apostles used it as such – quoting constantly from the Old Testament as they wrote the New Testament. Therefore, we must use the Bible to evaluate all things, including the Pentecostal/charismatic movement.

Categories of Interpretation

There are four major categories of interpretation made in evangelicalism about miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit. These categories are cessationism, open but cautious, third wave and Pentecostal/charismatic.¹ These are further described in the chart below.

Before we note the differences, we need to understand that these four views have much more in common than they have in dispute – at least on the level of scholarship. On the level of practice, however, there is much variation . . . and even occasional excess . . . within each view.

Wayne Grudem² identifies the following beliefs as common ground:

- That the Bible is authoritative and infallible
- That God answers prayer today, sometimes in miraculous ways
- That salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone
- That the Holy Spirit is active today in saving, sanctifying, filling and gifting – this is the Age of the Spirit

Grudem further states that none of these views, on a scholarly level, believe in the following (even though in some excessive cases on the practical level these teachings are promoted):

- Only those who speak in tongues are truly saved
- People who speak in tongues are more spiritual than those who do not
- When a person is not healed, it is because they have too little faith
- It is always God's will to heal
- God wants all people to be wealthy
- If we speak a "word of faith", God will give us what we claim
- There are apostles today
- If we are truly guided by the Spirit, we do not need to consult the Scriptures
- We should follow anointed leaders with fruitful ministries even if they deny the inerrancy of Scripture
- Speaking in tongues is usually of demonic origin
- God never uses our intuitions, promptings and feelings in guiding us
- God never works miracles today
- God should not be expected to heal today in answer to prayer

Cessationism is the view that the miraculous gifts – word gifts like tongues, interpretation of tongues and prophecy; and deed gifts like miracles and healing – had a specific and limited purpose: to authenticate the gospel message in the period of transition between the Old and New Testaments. It is noted that the incidence of miraculous gifts in human history is relatively rare, and is clearly attached to new movements of God – i.e. the Exodus, the beginning of the prophets (Elijah and Elisha), the Exile (Daniel), and supremely the Gospel (Jesus and the apostles). While cessationists believe God can and does do the miraculous today, they see this happening primarily in the salvation of the lost and the filling and gifting of the believer. Miraculous gifts – as something to be possessed and performed by a person – are no longer necessary because the canon is closed.

¹ These categories are defined in the book *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today?* Edited by Wayne Grudem.

² IBID. pp. 18-19.

Pentecostal/charismatic is the view that the miraculous gifts are not only for today, but should be sought for public demonstration. These gifts are primarily for the edification and sanctification of believers. It is generally believed (though not uniformly) that this gifting is bestowed by God at the baptism of the Holy Spirit – an event separate to salvation. Unfortunately, the most visible examples of this view are at the excessive end of the continuum – “health and wealth”, “word of faith” and other teachings that cross into apostasy and even cult-like control of followers claim to be part of this view.

	Cessationism	Open but Cautious	Third Wave	Pentecostal/charismatic
Date of Origin	Historic position of Christianity	1990s	1980s	1901 and renewed in 1960s and 1970s
Baptism of Holy Spirit	Coincides with salvation	Coincides with salvation	Coincides with salvation	An experience subsequent to salvation
Tongues	Ceased when the New Testament canon was completed.	May be a private prayer language. Not sought above other gifts.	Should be sought as a sign and enablement for the gospel today.	Should be sought as evidence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and practised to deepen one’s spirituality.
Miracles and Healings	Ceased with the completion of the New Testament.	May still be given by God, but not as is practiced by faith healers.	Should be sought to convince unbelievers and to bind the work of Satan.	A sign verifying the gospel today – and bringing kingdom relief to suffering people.
Prophecy definition	Infallible revelations from God. After the completion of the New Testament canon, this gift was redundant.	Infallible (or fallible) revelations from God that speak to specific contemporary matters and supplement the Bible.	Infallible revelations from God that speak to specific contemporary matters and supplement the Bible.	Infallible (or fallible) revelations from God that speak to specific contemporary matters. May include revelations about God that go beyond what is known from the Bible alone.
Prophecy practice	Study the Bible with careful grammatical-historical hermeneutics – and in dependence on the Holy Spirit to illumine – proclaim and apply the text to contemporary life.	Study the Bible with careful hermeneutics and in dependence on the Holy Spirit. Accept prophecies if compatible with the Bible.	Study the Bible with careful hermeneutics and in dependence on the Holy Spirit. Seek prophecies to be declared along with biblical truth.	Study the Bible and seek from the Holy Spirit prophecies to be declared along with biblical truth.

Third Wave (Vineyard) is the view that the miraculous gifts are for today and should be sought for public demonstration before unbelievers. Their goal is mass conversion in response to signs and wonders of the Holy Spirit – as it occurred in Acts 2. Some Vineyard leaders take this to excess by purposely seeking to engage and do battle with demons.

Open but Cautious is the view that miraculous gifts cannot be ruled out for today. While allowing for the possibility that believers are enabled to speak in tongues, to receive prophecies and to effect miracles, these gifts are neither sought nor given a public focus. Prophecy is the gift that is of greatest interest – immediate messages from God, either as intuitions, or impressions, or through dreams. Agabus, a prophet in Acts, is the biblical model for how this gift may be expected today. He predicted a famine in Acts 11.28, and predicted the arrest of Paul in Acts 21.20-21. Some Open but Cautious proponents (Wayne Grudem is one) see the current gift of prophecy to be less than the biblical gift, and allow for fallibility.

The Primary Works of the Holy Spirit

Because miraculous gifts are the point of controversy, most attention is given to them. This is unfortunate. Even if these gifts are for today, they are not the primary work of the Spirit. The primary work is agreed to by all four views: saving, sanctifying, filling and gifting.

Salvation

As we have previously learned in this study, the Holy Spirit plays an essential role in salvation. He convicts the sinner of sin, and then enables the sinner to repent and express faith. He is also the agent of life in regeneration.

Sanctification

When His divine and holy life becomes ours, we are naturally set apart as new creations. This indwelling is initiated at the time of salvation – and is also called the baptism of the Holy Spirit. It is because the Holy Spirit dwells within believers that their bodies are called the temple of the Holy Spirit.

Filling

This work of the Spirit is not uniformly understood. What some Pentecostal/charismatics call baptism, other views would call filling. What is the filling of the Holy Spirit and how is it effected?

Definition

The filling of the Holy Spirit is being under His divine control to the extent that our thoughts, words and actions emanate from His holy will. The effect is that we effortlessly express the character qualities of God – love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness and temperance. Beyond this, the control of the Holy Spirit brings divine enablement to testify and serve in an effective manner . . . to the glory of God.

We encounter the filling of the Spirit in the book of Acts.

For testifying

Acts 4:8 (NKJV)

⁸Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders of Israel:

In answer to prayer

Acts 4:31 (NKJV)

³¹And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness.

For courage

Acts 7:55 (NKJV)

⁵⁵ But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God,

A reputation

Acts 6:3 (NKJV)

³ Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of *good* reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business;

For fruitful service

Acts 11:24 (NKJV)

²⁴ For he [Barnabas] was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord.

Practice

Filling is something God commands of us, therefore, it is something we must seek purposely on a continuing and daily basis. Some commentators say that we should ask God to fill us. While I see no problem with this, and I do ask God to fill me on occasion, I think the primary action is to obey God. The filling is not a mystical infusion of divinity; it is God's practical control over the believer which is a cooperative between His power and our obedience.

I have used the analogy of a glass full of water. If there are rocks in the glass, the water will still be to the brim, but the glass is not full of water. To be full, the rocks must be removed and the water topped up. So it is with the Holy Spirit. When we have sin latent in our life, we cannot be filled with the Holy Spirit. Sin acts as a rocky obstruction displacing His holy control. But if we confess our sin, He forgives and cleanses so that the capacity of the Holy Spirit reaches capacity.

This is not a perfect analogy, of course. In reality, we never have less of the Holy Spirit indwelling us, as the glass with rocks should suggest. Wayne Grudem uses a balloon as an analogy. If you blow into a balloon, it is full of air. But if you blow into the same balloon, it will expand even more and still be full of air.

Believers always have a full measure of the Holy Spirit because He indwells us. But the measure can be fuller as we yield like a balloon to more of His expansiveness.

The essential activity is to seek His filling – by submissive obedience to the Holy Spirit's instruction through the Word of God, and His guidance from within.

Ephesians 5:18 (NKJV)

¹⁸ And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit,

This verse could be translated, be continually being filled with the Spirit. It is a continuous action – to be sought daily.

When we are filled, the results will follow as in Ephesians 5. We will express thanks and praise to God (v 19-20); we will submit to other people – preferring them above ourselves (v 21); we will have right relationships in the home (vv 22-33; 6.1-4) and at work (6.5-9); and we will have victory over the oppressive activity of the Evil One (6.12ff).

The filling of the Spirit is the means by which God's character (fruit) is exhibited in us and God's ministry is performed through us. We must submit to His filling, otherwise we grieve Him.

Ephesians 4:30 (NKJV)

³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

Gifting

The Holy Spirit edifies the body of Christ through its members. He provides to each member special enablement to build up others. This is done sovereignly – so that every church has the complement of gifts needed to be healthy and growing.

Gifts

There are a few places in the New Testament where spiritual gifts are listed. These can be categorised as word gifts and deed gifts. All are essential and equally valuable to the church.

Romans 12:4-8 (NKJV)

⁴ For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, ⁵ so we, *being* many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. ⁶ Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, *let us use them*: if prophecy, *let us prophesy* in proportion to our faith; ⁷ or ministry, *let us use it* in *our* ministering; he who teaches, in teaching; ⁸ he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.

1 Corinthians 12:4-6 (NKJV)

⁴ There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. ⁵ There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. ⁶ And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all.

1 Corinthians 12:8-10 (NKJV)

⁸ for to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, to another the word of knowledge through the same Spirit, ⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healings by the same Spirit, ¹⁰ to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another discerning of spirits, to another *different* kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues.

1 Corinthians 12:28 (NKJV)

²⁸ And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues.

Ephesians 4:11 (NKJV)

¹¹ And He Himself gave some *to be* apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers,

It is probable that these lists are not meant to be exhaustive – otherwise there would be a uniformity about them.

Talents

Sometimes talent is confused with spiritual giftedness. All people are born with . . . or develop over time . . . certain talents and abilities. Music is an obvious example. But these are not the same as spiritual gifts. For one thing, many unbelievers have these abilities.

Spiritual gifts are enablements from God to serve the local church. It has been said, you are born with talent, and born again with spiritual gifts.

Practice

Many people make the mistake of thinking they cannot serve God until they discover their gift(s). Actually, the opposite is the right approach. Serve God and then you and others will naturally observe how God is using you to be a blessing. This may be something that can be labelled from one of the lists quoted above, or it may not. The label is unimportant.

I might add that there is no indication that gifts are permanent.

The essential part about gifts is that God gives them for the edification of the church. Therefore, every believer must be committed to faithful attendance at church and diligent service to the church. The giftedness then takes care of itself.

1 Corinthians 12:7 (NKJV)

⁷ But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit *of all*:

1 Corinthians 12:31 (NKJV)

³¹ But earnestly desire the best gifts. And yet I show you a more excellent way.

1 Corinthians 13:13 (NKJV)

¹³ And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these *is* love.