

The Holy Spirit in the Church

by William MacDonald

The Holy Spirit is sovereign and should be allowed to lead the church, rather than being quenched by unscriptural rules and human control.

Scripture: Acts 2:3, 1 Thessalonians 5:19

Topics: "The Role of the Holy Spirit", "Freedom in Worship"

Description

William MacDonald emphasizes the vital role of the Holy Spirit in the church, urging congregations to seek His guidance in all matters, from decision-making to worship practices. He highlights the sovereignty of the Spirit, noting that His unpredictable nature should not be constrained by human control or formalism, which can quench His power. MacDonald warns against the dangers of suppressing the Spirit's freedom, as this leads to a loss of spiritual vitality and enthusiasm within the church. He calls for a return to a more dynamic and Spirit-led worship experience, where each member is encouraged to express their gifts and fervor. Ultimately, he envisions a church where the Holy Spirit is allowed to lead, resulting in vibrant and transformative gatherings.

Transcript

PRACTICAL GUIDANCE

The assembly should seek His guidance in all its affairs' whether in choosing a location for its public testimony, arranging the types of meetings to be held, discerning the human instruments to be used in ministering the Word of God, disbursement of funds, or carrying on godly discipline.

THE HOLY SPIRIT IS SOVEREIGN

The local church should ever recognize the sovereignty of the Spirit. By this we mean that He can do as He pleases, and that He will not always choose to do things in exactly the same way, though He will never act contrary to the Word. Some of the symbols of the Spirit used in the scriptures - fire, oil, water, wind speak of fluidity, of unpredictable behavior. Thus, wise Christians will be sufficiently elastic to allow Him this divine prerogative.

It was so in the early church, but soon people became uneasy with meetings that were "free and social, with the minimum of form." Thus controls were added and formalism and ritualism took over. The Holy Spirit was quenched, and the church lost its power.

QUENCHING THE SPIRIT

This shift from the freedom of the Spirit to human control has been described by James Denney eloquently. Though Mr. Denney writes at some length, the reader will find his article will richly repay study. Commenting on the verse, "Quench not the Spirit," (I Thess 5:19) he says: 'When the Holy Spirit descended on the Church at Pentecost, there appeared unto them tongues parting asunder, like as of fire; and it sat upon each one of them'; and their lips were opened to declare the mighty works of God. A man who has received this great gift is described as fervent, literally, boiling, with the Spirit. The new birth in those early days was a new birth; it kindled in the soul thoughts and feelings to which it had hitherto been strange; it brought with it the consciousness of new powers; a new vision of God; a new love of holiness; a new insight into the Holy Scriptures, and into the meaning of man's life; often a new power of ardent, passionate speech. In the First Epistle to the Corinthians Paul describes a primitive Christian congregation. There was not one silent among them. When they came together every one had a psalm, a revelation, a prophecy, an interpretation. The manifestation of the Spirit had been given to each one to profit withal; and on all hands the spiritual fire was ready to flame forth. Conversion to the Christian faith, the acceptance of the apostolic Gospel, was not a thing which made little difference to men: it convulsed their whole nature to its depth; they were never the same again; they were new creatures, with a new life in them, all fervor and flame

"A state so unlike nature, in the ordinary sense of the term, was sure to have its inconveniences. The Christian, even when he had received the gift of the Holy Ghost, was still a man; and as likely as not a man who had to struggle against vanity, folly, ambition, and selfishness of all kinds. His enthusiasm might even seem, in the first instance, to aggravate, instead of removing, his natural faults. It might drive him to speak-for in a primitive church anybody who pleased might speak - when it would have been better for him to be silent. It might lead him to break out in prayer or praise or exhortation, in a style which made the wise sigh. And for those reasons the wise, and such as thought themselves wise, would be apt to discourage the exercise of spiritual gifts altogether. 'Contain yourself,, they would say to the man whose heart burned within him, and who was restless till the flame could leap out; 'contain yourself; exercise a little self-control; it is unworthy of a rational being to be carried away in this fashion.'

"No doubt situations like this were common in the church at Thessalonica. They are produced inevitably by difference of age and of temperament. The old and the phlegmatic are a natural, and, doubtless, a providential, counterweight to the young and sanguine. But the wisdom which comes of experience and of temperament has its disadvantages as compared with fervor of spirit. It is cold and unenthusiastic; it cannot propagate itself; it cannot set fire to anything and spread. And because it is under this incapacity of kindling the souls of men into enthusiasm, it is forbidden to pour cold water on enthusiasm when it breaks forth in words of fire. That is the meaning of 'Quench not the Spirit.' The commandment presupposes that the Spirit can be quenched. Cold looks, contemptuous words, silence, studied disregard, go a long way to quench it. So does unsympathetic criticism.

"Everyone knows that a fire smokes most when it is newly kindled; but the way to get rid of the smoke is not to pour cold water on the fire, but to let it burn itself clear. If you are wise enough you may facilitate this by rearranging the materials, or securing a better draught; but the wisest thing most people can do when the fire has got hold is to let it alone; and that is also the wise course for most when they meet with a disciple whose zeal burns like fire. Very likely the smoke hurts their eyes; but the smoke will soon pass by; and it may well be tolerated in the meantime for the sake of heat.

For this apostolic precept takes for granted that fervor of spirit, a Christian enthusiasm for what is good, is the best thing in the world. It may be untaught and inexperienced; it may have all its mistakes to make; it may be wonderfully blind to the limitations which the stern necessities of life put upon the generous hopes of man: but it is of God; it is expansive; it is contagious; it is worth more as a spiritual force than all the wisdom in the world.

"I have hinted at ways in which the Spirit is quenched, it is sad to reflect that from one point of view the history of the church is a long series of rebellions of the Spirit. 'Where the Spirit of the Lord is,' the Apostle tells us elsewhere, 'there is liberty.' But liberty in a society has its dangers; It is, to a certain extent, at war with order; and the guardians of order are not apt to be too considerate of it. Hence it came to pass that at a very early period, and in the interests of good order, the freedom of the Spirit was summarily suppressed in the church. 'The gift of ruling,' it has been said, 'like Aaron's rod, seemed to swallow up the other gifts.' The rulers of the church became a class entirely apart from its ordinary members, and all exercise of spiritual gifts for the building up of the church was confined to them. Nay, the monstrous idea was originated, and taught as a dogma, that they alone were the depositaries, or, as it is sometimes said, the custodians, of the grace and truth of the gospel; only through them could men come into contact with the Holy Ghost. In plain English, the Spirit was quenched when Christians met for worship. One great extinguisher was placed over the flame that burned in the hearts of the brethren; it was not allowed to show itself; it must not disturb, by its eruption in praise or prayer or fiery exhortation, the decency and order of divine service.

I say that was the condition to which Christian worship was reduced at a very early period; and it is unhappily the condition in which, for the most part, it subsists at this moment. Do you think we are gainers by it? I do not believe it. It has always come from time to time to be intolerable. The Montanists of the second century, the heretical sects of the middle ages, the Independents and Quakers of the English Commonwealth, the lay preachers of Wesleyanism, the Salvationists, the Plymouthists, and the Evangelistic associations of our own day, all these are in various degrees the protest of the Spirit, and its right and necessary protest, against the authority which would quench it, and by quenching it impoverish the church.'

The assembly, then, should never fetter the Holy Spirit, either with unscriptural rules, stereotyped program, rituals, or liturgies. How grieved He must often be by rigid understandings that a meeting must end at a certain time, that a service must always follow a certain routine, that ministry at certain stages of a worship meeting IS quite unacceptable! Such regulations can only lead to a loss of spiritual power.

IF THE SPIRIT HAD HIS WAY TODAY

We might well pause to ask ourselves what it would be like in our local churches if the Holy Spirit were really depended on to be the Divine Leader. C. H. Mackintosh gives a vivid description of such a situation, and we reproduce it here:

"We have but little conception of what an assembly would be were each one distinctly led by the Holy Ghost, and gathered only to Jesus. We should not then have to complain of dull, heavy, unprofitable, trying meetings. We should have no fear of an unhallowed intrusion of mere nature and its restless doings--no making of prayer--no talking for talking's sake--no hymnbook seized to fill a gap. Each one would know his place in the Lord's immediate presence--each gifted vessel would be filled, fitted, and used by the Master's hand--each eye would be directed to Jesus--each heart occupied with Him. If a chapter were read

it would be the very voice of God. If a word were spoken, it would tell with power upon the heart. if prayer were offered, it would lead the soul into the very presence of God. If a hymn were sung, it would lift the spirit up to God, and be like sweeping the strings of the heavenly harp. We should feel ourselves in the very sanctuary of God and enjoy a foretaste of that time when we shall worship in the courts above and go no more out.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/william-macdonald/the-holy-spirit-in-the-church/>

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