

PAUL'S THEOLOGY

Lesson 14

The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Excesses

As I sit at this keyboard, I am trying to think of all the different ways I have communicated in my life. Obviously, one is by typing/keyboarding a message. I have used this method both with a typewriter and a computer keyboard. A number of you have exchanged emails with me. The Blackberry makes it quite easy to do, even when travelling.

Another manner of communication that readily comes to mind is the cell phone. In fact, I called my wife just a few minutes ago. We also speak to communicate with "landlines" as well as face to face. My children have taught me to Skype, letting me speak to them over the Internet. Usually, I speak in English, but in the right restaurant, I have been known to try some Spanish. In Greece, I even mutter a few words in Greek, although I am not sure anyone really understood me!

Growing up, my mother was able to communicate with certain expressions on her face. I could often tell by looking at her if I was in trouble! My Dad knew Morse code from his days in the Navy, and it had great novelty appeal to me growing up, especially as I tried to work with short wave radio signals.

Do you remember CB radios among non-truck drivers? 10-4, good buddy!

Some people are able to read Braille. Others are able to use sign language.

During War times, many important communications were made in code. Spies lived and died by the secrecy codes provided. It made quite a difference in the war when the Allies figured out the Nazi codes used to communicate with submarines.

Go to a baseball game sometime and watch the catcher flash signals to the pitcher, or watch the third base coach signal a runner. The umpire communicates ball and strikes with hand gestures. We all know the gestures for "Safe!" "You're out!" and "Time out."

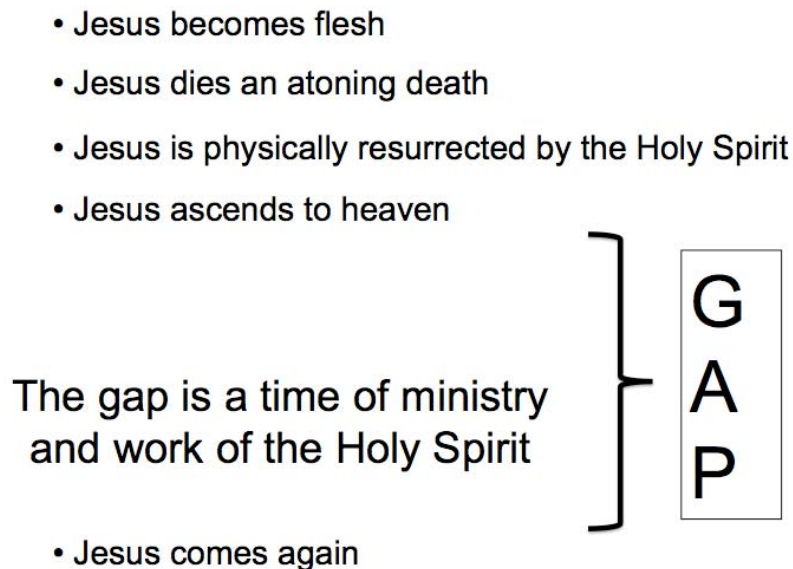
Different situations call for different types of communications. Time itself has changed the ways we communicate. I have never used a carrier pigeon to communicate, but it sounded like a good idea in its day. Once as a very young child, I tried to make smoke signals like the Native Americans, but I had no clue what I was doing and failed to communicate anything! (I do remember coughing from the smoke).

We mention this, as we look this week at the ways the Holy Spirit has communicated in the church. It helps us to understand the historical readings we have in scripture if we remember how effective communication changes over time and circumstance. For we see the Holy Spirit working and communicating in Corinth in ways that are not too familiar for many in churches today. We will focus on the issue of speaking in tongues as a spiritual gift in Corinth.

We begin by refreshing our minds on the material learned in the last three weeks.¹ Paul understood the Old Testament teaching that God's Holy Spirit was seen on earth as the visible results of God's unseen actions. Much as the wind was understood and known by what it did, so God's Spirit was known by working God's agenda.

Similarly, we are reminded of the promises of Jesus concerning the Holy Spirit. The Spirit was not simply some electric force that energized the church or believer. The Spirit was a counselor, a helper, God the Father and Christ sent to aid the church in understanding its purpose, Christ's work, the Father's role, and the inheritance of the saints. The Spirit was sent for explicit purposes Jesus clearly set forth in John 14-16.

Finally, we learned that Paul understood the gap in time where Jesus sits on the throne, before his second coming, was a gap filled by the ministry and work of the Holy Spirit. In this sense, we produced the drawing:



¹ The past lessons can be downloaded in multiple formats at the class website: www.Biblical-Literacy.com.

Last week, we added many of the lessons the Holy Spirit teaches the believer and the church about the inheritance of the saints in Jesus. We need to hold onto these points this week as we examine an actual church situation in Corinth where the Spirit was at work. We will see some Spirit-related problems that arose among the believers. We hope to understand more fully how Paul saw the problems, and the solutions Paul taught.

Our ultimate goal is to then compare the situation in Corinth and Paul's teaching on it to the church today. We are in a position then to apply Paul's theology on the Holy Spirit and measure out the appropriate spiritual lessons for our churches and believers today.

THE SITUATION

We in the 21st century, like the Corinthian church of the 1st century, live in what we are terming, the Gap. This time of the Holy Spirit's ministry applied to the church and believers in Paul's day just as it does in ours. It is the same Spirit at work in our lives and churches today as was at work in the day of Paul. Similarly, the Spirit's purposes have not changed. As Jesus taught, the Spirit came to help and teach us by bringing glory to Christ and guiding us in truth.

While we have the same Spirit with the same purposes, and live in the Gap, as did the 1st century Corinthians, we must readily confess that our times are different in many ways. Let us contrast our assemblies and the state of the church today with that of biblical Corinth. In doing so, we can readily identify different means the Spirit had at his disposal for communicating then compared to today.

The Corinthian church did not have the benefit of the New Testament. Until Paul's first letter to them, they likely had no writings at all which make up our New Testament scriptures. We need to emphasize that not only did they not have the New Testament, but they also had never had it. While this may seem a redundant addition, it is not. We could go a Sunday in our churches without the New Testament because we have had these scriptures for centuries. So, the scriptures have left a firm imprint on our churches and faith even where/when the scriptures might not be readily available for some reason.

The truths that the Holy Spirit has put into our New Testament are truths that the pre-scripture church needed, but they were not present in written form for them. We have those in writing for all to read and study. The Corinthians did not.

An additional difference is the presence of the apostles and apostolic authority. The Corinthians did not have regular apostolic presence at their worship, nor were the apostles available by cell phone, email, or ready postal service. That said, the

church did have access to apostolic oversight and teaching, even though it was irregular. Paul, Peter, and others undoubtedly took time and interest for the Corinthians and the other local churches during that age. This means that the church was often “on its own” and yet was still subject to reproving and correcting writings and visits by Paul and others.

Our church today is different. We have no direct access to the living apostles of Jesus. We have something in this area, however, the Corinthians did not have. We have many writings of these apostles, again found in our New Testaments. This provides us teachings that, while needing study and understanding for interpretation and application, are appropriate checks on our teachings and practices.

A final distinction we should add is our centuries of church history. For almost 2,000 years, Christian minds, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, have sought to understand and live the messages of God and Christ through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The Corinthians had no such traditions and history.

Understanding those differences, we should now return to an earlier point: the same Holy Spirit was ministering and communicating in biblical-era Corinth that ministers to the church today. The Corinthian church needed the worship, teaching, and edification of the Spirit, just as we do today. But because the church was in a different place, with different tools, in a different time, we would not be surprised to see differences in how the Holy Spirit went about communicating.

With that situation in mind, let us consider the problems that had arisen pertaining to the Holy Spirit, prompting much of what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians.

THE PROBLEMS

As we read 1 Corinthians, we are able to get a fairly solid grasp of some of the problems Paul wrote to correct. Admittedly, it is a bit like hearing just one side of a telephone conversation, and so we may not have all the details of the problems. Still, we are able to determine the things we need to know to put Paul’s writings on the Spirit into context.

We can analogize the problems the Corinthians were having in this area to some rules on driving. Have you seen areas where the speed limit has both a maximum and minimum? There is an area nearby where the maximum speed limit is 55 miles per hour and the minimum is 40 miles per hour. If you are to drive that stretch of road, then you should keep your car in the mid-range more than 40 mph, but less than 55. The goal, of course, is to keep traffic moving safely by stopping the speeders and the slower! (Admittedly, a made up word, but one I have found quite useful when driving. Use it as a noun in sentences like, “Why are all the slower out driving today?”)

When it came to the working of the Holy Spirit and its gifts to the church, the Corinthians seemed both to speed and go too slow!

- **SPEEDING:** The Corinthians were abusing the gift of tongues. Simply put, they had too much usage at the wrong time and circumstances.
- **SLOWNESS:** The Corinthians put too great an emphasis on the role of tongues in the church, and as a result, undercut many other important ways the Spirit wished to work.

These two problems, excessive tongue usage in the wrong time and place and minimized usage of the other spiritual gifts, seemed to grow out of the same problem: The Corinthians were misguided on what it meant to be “spiritual.” This problem was too important for Paul to leave alone. Hence, we read Paul addressing the problems from both ends, trying to bring tongue usage back where it belonged, and trying to boost the other spiritual gifts into their proper place.

The Corinthians likely thought the Spirit had transformed them into something much more akin to angels. They sought to speak in “tongues of angels” (1 Cor. 13:1) uttering “mysteries in the Spirit” (1 Cor. 14:2). They believed that as the super-spiritual, they were to refrain from sexual relations with their spouses (1 Cor. 7:1-7). Some even thought that there would be no bodily resurrection, which Paul corrects in 1 Corinthians 15.

Paul knew the Spirit better! Paul knew that the Spirit-filled Christian was not about trying to achieve such abnormal states. Rather, true spirituality was found in living through weakness as a human by the power and strength of God. This was Paul’s spiritual truth he wrote of early in the letter (1 Cor. 2). With a biting sarcasm in 1 Corinthians 4, Paul mocks those Corinthians who were noting Paul’s weakness as compared to the world and to angels. Paul notes that he might seem a fool, but let all take heed, he was a fool for the sake of Christ!

As we consider the Corinthian problem of misplaced practice of what is true spirituality, we can better understand why and how Paul sought to bring the gifts back into alignment. The wrong teaching in Corinth was damaging to the believers and to the church at large.

The believers had divided the church with quarreling (1 Cor. 1:11 “For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there is quarreling among you”) and divisions (1 Cor. 1:13 “Is Christ divided?”). Attempting to be super spiritual had left the Corinthians under-grown babies! (1 Cor. 3:1-2 “But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready.”)

Paul set about to rectify the problem. Paul addressed both the excesses of the tongue practice in the worship assemblies as well as the failure to appreciate the other gifts and workings of the Spirit.

THE FIX

In chapter 12 of 1 Corinthians, Paul sets out to redirect the church's thinking about the gifts:

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed (1 Cor. 12:1).

The gift of tongues, was not the only gift, nor was it the most important. Although it might have a certain "flash appeal," Paul explains that the Spirit gives many different, equally important gifts:

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone (1 Cor. 12:4-6).²

Paul knew the church was missing the critical understanding that the work of the Spirit was the work of God. Spiritual gifts were not randomly assigned as if there were a heavenly lottery, nor were they chosen as one might choose teammates in a game of basketball. The gifts were directed by God for the purposes of God:

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit (1 Cor. 12:7-8).

Paul then lists a number of different gifts, with tongues (speaking and interpreting) given last. Paul's list is not exhaustive, but representative. He makes the list to make his point that God is giving gifts for God's purposes in the church and while the origin of the gifts is singular, the gifts vary greatly:

All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills (1 Cor. 12:11).

Paul then uses the analogy of the many parts of a human body to emphasize his point that all parts are important and all play a role.

² These verses become critical to the church as it tried to understand the Trinity. More on that next week as we begin studying the Godhead, three in one!

It is in this context that Paul writes 1 Corinthians 13, the famous chapter on love. Paul knew that for the church to understand the hand of God and the workings of his Spirit, the church needed to understand the importance and character of Godly love. Living God's love would stop the competitive spirituality, would tame the self-importance, and would reintroduce the Corinthians to the purpose and role of the Spirit's gifts. It allows Paul to proceed with a loving appeal that the Corinthians reduce the role of speaking in tongues in favor of other gifts that build up the body:

Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him...The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church (1 Cor. 14:1-4).

Paul is not forbidding the practice of tongues; it is something he himself does. But Paul knows that in a service, it does not edify those who cannot understand it:

If with your tongue you utter speech that is not intelligible, how will anyone know what is said? For you will be speaking into the air (1 Cor. 14:9).

Importantly, Paul deprives the Corinthians of any suggestion that his position might be sour grapes arising from his personal lack of such a spiritual gift. Paul assures the Corinthians:

I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you.

That said, Paul then places speaking in tongues into perspective when in a church service:

In church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue (1 Cor. 14:19).

Paul finishes his discussion on these gifts and issues by placing strict limits on the practice of speaking in tongues:

Let all things be done for building up. If any speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn, and let someone interpret. But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God (1 Cor. 14:26-28).

Paul's fix seamlessly weaves in the purpose of love and the needed result of order, all as part of his practical fix of a theological problem!

POINTS FOR HOME

Where does this leave us in this study of the Spirit? What does this mean for our lives and our worship services? As we discussed in our opening, times change, and subsequently, circumstances change. We live in an age where we have God's words in written scripture, inspired fully by the Holy Spirit. Does that mean the Spirit no longer works as he did in the first century church?

I suggest that is not a Biblical question. The Bible teaches us about the Holy Spirit and we are taught quite plainly what the Holy Spirit does in and through the church and the believer. The scripture never puts a box around *how* the Spirit might choose to do his work; it simply notes *what* the Spirit is working to do.

That said, we do know that the Spirit works in our churches today in ways he did not in the biblical churches. They did not have the New Testament scriptures we have (save a letter here and there). We have apostolic teaching they missed. They had access to eyewitnesses of Christ's resurrection (1 Cor. 15:3-8) that we must read about rather than meet.

What lessons do we take from this?

1. *"To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."* (1 Cor. 12:8).

The Spirit is at work. We still live in the Gap, in the time of the Spirit's work and ministry. The Spirit works through his word and through his people. The purpose is for the common good. We know as we live and work in our church communities for the good of our brothers and sisters, we are doing the Spirit's work; God is at work in us. Some have the patience and gracious love to change diapers in the preschool department so that parents can worship and study. These people have the Spirit at work in them for the good of the church. Others have a wonderful gift of organizing. They are able to coordinate activities, keep classes growing, and serve the common good. God's Spirit is at work in these people too. The gifts are not about being showy. Neither the Spirit nor the spiritual person would ever have care that attention is brought to the individual. The key is the common good!

2. *"Pursue love"* (1 Cor. 14:1).

There is no greater spiritual gift. Love is the ultimate never ending gift that gives purpose and meaning to all other gifts. It was love that took Christ into the world and onto the cross ("For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." Jn 3:16; "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay

down his life for a friend” (Jn 15:13)). It is love that God gives us (“See what kind of love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God” 1 Jn 3:1). Love was the commandment of Christ to his followers (“A new commandment I give you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another” Jn 13:34). It is the mark of the church (“By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” Jn 13:35). God’s love should mold all we do. It is a certain sign of the Spirit’s working within us!

3. *“Earnestly desire the spiritual gifts.”* (1 Cor. 14:1).

Even as the Spirit might work differently in our day (or maybe the same at times), we should heed Paul’s admonition to earnestly desire his work among us. We should never seek to serve the church through our own efforts and strengths without purposely relying upon God. Now that does not mean, for example, that we do not prepare lessons (like this one!), but it does mean that in our preparation, we study the scriptures (God-Spirited word) with prayer and devotion, seeking what God would have us say and teach. Similarly in other areas, we seek God’s hand in what we do and how we do it. Knowing that he did not leave us as orphans, we live in the Gap empowered by his ever-present Spirit!

POSTSCRIPT:

Many of you reading this lesson may be asking, “Why didn’t Mark answer my questions on speaking in tongues?” Let me respond:

I believe I have given the tools for the answers, as I understand them. Scripture does not tell us *how* the Spirit will work in any situation at any particular time. Can people, inspired by the Holy Spirit speak in tongues today? Heaven forbid I tell the Holy Spirit how he should work in the church to carry out his ministry and purposes! In other words, I believe God can do whatever he wants to do. I am not one to tell him otherwise.

That said, Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, makes it clear how any exercise of such a gift should take place in a church assembly. His clear instructions on a needed interpretation, order in execution, and limit in number should be taken as God’s instructions and followed. Paul’s admonition that tongues are not useful for the building up of the church, and might even drive off visitors also puts guidelines on our conduct in community worship services. Finally, I should add that while there was a need for divine words from the mouths of the believers in Paul’s day, that need is not here today, in the same sense and extent. We have the New Testament, God’s word given by the Spirit. They did not.

I do not believe that the closed canon of scripture is the “perfect” that Paul discussed in 1 Corinthians 13 as that which will end the need for certain spiritual gifts. Gifts are a part of how the Spirit works in the church. Further, I believe that in some foreign cultures on the mission field, God may well use a gift of tongues. There, however, the tongues most useful would be of an unstudied or unknown foreign language.

These questions were not before Paul as he wrote 1 Corinthians. So we are guided by his principles, trying to piece together our best understanding. The ultimate test for us should be whether the exercise is consistent with Paul’s instructions, whether it builds up the church and whether it meets the Lord’s teachings on the Holy Spirit (that Christ is lifted up, not the person or even the Spirit!)