

PERSPECTIVES
on
PENTECOST

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Studies in New Testament Teaching
on the Gifts of the Holy Spirit

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Preface

This volume began as a series of lectures given throughout New Zealand under the auspices of the Evangelical Reformed Conferences in December 1974–January 1975. They subsequently served as the basis for a study paper prepared for a conference on the work of the Holy Spirit held in connection with the meeting of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod in Cape Town, South Africa, in August 1976. This paper, in turn, was expanded into a course of twelve lectures given at Westminster Theological Seminary during the winter term, January 1977. Along the way I have valued the (sometimes sharp) criticisms that have been raised, and I hope that what is written here reflects a measure of benefit from them all.

When quoting from Scripture I have followed the practice of choosing from among the various standard translations or providing one of my own. The translations cited by abbreviation are the following:

KJV (King James Version)

NASB (New American Standard Bible)

NEB (The New English Bible)

NIV (New International Version–New Testament)

RSV (Revised Standard Version)

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I

A Promise and a Plea

Controversy in the church is both distressing and hopeful. It is distressing because it is essentially counterproductive, an abnormality which, to mention only one set of consequences, compromises the church, reduces its credibility both to itself and the world, and thus impairs its effectiveness in the world. But unlike controversy in the world, which at best softens into uneasy compromises, controversy in the church holds the promise of constructive resolution, especially where the different sides are able to recognize in one another a common commitment to the final authority of the Bible as God's Word. Where the controversy itself, at least in its best moments, reflects the effort of wrestling with the meaning of Scripture in order to be more fully obedient to the Lord, then there is hope for genuine unity in the truth.

Since around 1960 few topics have received more attention in the church than the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Some would say that this is still today *the* issue confronting the worldwide church. Certainly none has been the occasion of greater controversy and division within the church. That controversy is intense. Differences are strongly felt and often sharply expressed, and this is understandable, because at stake is Christian practice, the very personal experience of being a Christian.

This book is yet another entry into this highly-charged controversy over the gifts of the Spirit. Like many others it too reflects

the conviction that the one Spirit of Pentecost has not been poured out on the church to be a source of disunity. But, unlike some, it is written out of the conviction that the promise of Jesus that the Spirit "will guide you into all truth" (John 16:13) is inseparable in its fulfillment from the assurance expressed, for instance, by the apostle Paul that "the word of God is not bound" (II Tim. 2:9). The freedom of the Spirit working with the Word! The promise contained in this reality and the confident expectation of what the Spirit is yet to do in the church, despite our often confused mishandling of Scripture, ought to control from beginning to end any concern with the Spirit's gifts.

A second controlling conviction of this book is that experience itself is not a source of Christian knowledge and doctrine. Nor are the experiences that Christians have the norm for Christian experience. Our entire experience, not just every thought, must be made captive to the obedience of Christ and his Word (II Cor. 10:5). The Bible is the standard for all genuinely Christian experience. My plea, then, is that where I have succeeded in casting the searching light of biblical teaching on the confusing crosscurrents of present day claims to experiences of the Spirit, the reader be willing to evaluate such claims in that light and above all to subject his own experience to the authority of Scripture.

The ground plan of this book involves a progressively narrowing exegetical focus on the subject of spiritual gifts. It begins by trying to capture in a brief sketch something of the breadth and richness of the whole work of the Spirit in the church (chapter II), moves on to survey a number of considerations that bear on spiritual gifts in general (chapter III), then concentrates specifically on the gifts of prophecy and tongues (chapter IV) and the question of their cessation (chapter V). The final chapter seeks briefly to relate the exegetical conclusions of the preceding chapters to some of the fundamental issues raised by the renewed and intense interest of our day in spiritual gifts.

The audience I have had in mind while writing is the wider community of all interested and serious students of Scripture, not only (and not especially) professional theologians and those with formal theological training. My hope especially is that this book will find its way into the hands of Christians with backgrounds

and outlooks different from my own, if not to convince them, at least to stimulate their own further wrestling with what the Scriptures teach. In view of this intended audience I have dispensed almost entirely with footnotes and have not cited any of the already overwhelming but still increasing mountain of relevant secondary literature presently available. I acknowledge my dependence on the work of others at almost every point. The well-read, more informed reader will often be able to recognize the sources of this indebtedness as well as of the viewpoints with which I differ. Where I have been compelled to disagree, I have tried to read widely and carefully and to represent fairly. An effort has been made throughout to quote the Scriptures extensively, but the reader is encouraged to keep a Bible at hand and to take the time to consult the cross-references.

Finally, I am aware that many readers may sometimes, perhaps often, find what I have written problematic. Anyone looking for easy answers and discussion free of all complications will be disappointed. The fact that Christians with a common commitment to the final authority of the Bible are divided over the issue of spiritual gifts is one indication that intrinsic difficulties are involved, and the expectation (in any quarter) of facile solutions only confuses an already complex situation. No doubt there are places where my own work needs to be corrected. Again, my plea is not that these weaknesses be ignored, but that those disposed to point them out and dwell on them also try to appreciate what strengths the Holy Spirit—working with the Word—may have granted to this study.

