

Word and Spirit

The Vital Union

Alison J. Sherrington

Fourth edition

Previous editions of *Word and Spirit* were subtitled
Coming to Terms with the Charismatic Movement

Foreword by Rev Dr Geoff Waugh

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Foreword

Alison Sherrington's *Word and Spirit: The Vital Union* "is intended as an encouragement to be both faithful to the Word and open to the Spirit."

Her book provides an excellent introduction to contemporary concerns raised by charismatic renewal. It rejects a false dichotomy between Word and Spirit, places experience under the scrutiny of revealed theology, acknowledges a dynamic exegesis which refuses to be contained within our Western conceptual framework (for the wind blows where it will), and explores spiritual gifts in terms of God's sovereign presence in all of life – not merely as theories confined to our paltry categories.

As a comment on faith and obedience, the book calls for courageous openness to God's work in His world in the power of His Spirit. This involves change for us all, no matter what our pet categories may be. God's ways cannot be confined to ours. We are encouraged to seek the Giver even more than His gifts. He is Lord. He gives *charis* (grace) and *charismata* (gifts of grace) more liberally and more comprehensively than any evangelical or Pentecostal theology can categorize.

Alison Sherrington affirms the importance of both Word and Spirit and challenges any dividing or emasculating of them. She does not attempt an exhaustive exegesis, but calls for faith in God founded on obedience to the Word of God empowered by obedience to the Spirit of God.

This book is useful as a guide for those confused by the legalism of much current debate (on all sides) because it affirms

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the primacy of God's Word revealed and interpreted by His Spirit.

Dr Paul Pillai, former Hindu lawyer and the founder of Indian Inland Mission, with over 600 Bible College students, used this book as an important textbook. He wrote, "The Lord is using this book in a wonderful way. It is one of the most needed books for all of us moving in the Spirit. The Lord used it much to clear many things concerning His ways."

I pray that God will indeed use this book in your life to clarify and apply His Word to you in the power of His Spirit.

Rev Dr Geoff Waugh

Editor, *Renewal Journal*

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Experiences of the Holy Spirit

The charismatic claims

According to the *World Christian Encyclopedia* (D. B. Barrett, G. T. Kurian, T. M. Johnson, Oxford, 2001), in 1970 the worldwide number of Pentecostal or charismatic Christians was 72.2 million, 6.4% of all Christians, but by 2000 the number had grown to 523.7 million, 27.7% of all Christians (vol. 1, 20). The web site of the Center for the Study of Global Christianity (Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Massachusetts) has 600 million as the 2015 figure, while in his article “World Christianity by the Numbers” (*First Things*, 25 Feb. 2015), George Weigel states that there are about 643.7 million. Nearly all Pentecostal and charismatic Christians – around 30% of all Christians – claim they have had an experience of the Holy Spirit which they refer to most commonly as being baptized with or in the Spirit, being filled with the Spirit, or receiving the Spirit. Whatever the expression used (there are several other expressions also) and whatever the variations in the experience of different people, it is evident from numerous testimonies that God’s power and love and His empowerment have been felt in a direct, intimate way.

It is noteworthy that some of these Christians claim to have had this experience of the Spirit at the time of their conversion to Christ, or immediately afterwards, while others claim that they were committed Christians with a saving faith in Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Saviour for some time – perhaps even many years – before they experienced the Holy Spirit in this special way. Most, but not all, claim that during or shortly after

this experience they found themselves speaking words which did not belong to any language known to them. Some say they have had this experience only once, while others claim to have had it on two or more occasions. Some say it came in answer to prayer, with or without laying on of hands, while others say it came unbidden. Some were alone at the time, while for others it was a group experience. Some claim that they experienced sensations of warmth or bright light or torrents of water or an electric current, or even supernatural wind or fire. Others say that although they felt spiritually overwhelmed, they can recall no extraordinary phenomena. However, all these Christians seem to be united in their testimony that this experience has brought them much spiritual benefit, both in their personal lives and in their ability to share with others the Good News of Jesus Christ. Particularly is this true of those who were “born again” a fairly long time before their personal experience of the Spirit, and who can therefore compare their life in Christ before it with their life in Christ after it.

Does experience matter?

At this point something must be said about the place of experience in the Christian life. The familiar (and perhaps unjustified) criticism that charismatic beliefs are based on experience instead of on Scripture implies that Christians should ignore experience. Even if this were desirable, in practice it is impossible. Every Christian, whether he realizes it or not, interprets Scripture partly in the light of his own experience; and a Christian’s interpretation of Scripture largely determines which kinds of experiences he considers valid. In many circles it is acceptable to give an emotional account of a dramatic experience of conversion to Christ, but unacceptable even to mention the possibility that a Christian of our time could have a direct experience of the Holy Spirit.

Since Jesus Christ is Lord of the whole of life, and the Bible is God’s Word written by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the Christian cannot afford either to ignore experience or to base doctrine upon it. Instead, he must try to bring it under the Lordship of Christ by testing and interpreting it as objectively as

possible in the light of Scripture while seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Experience that has no Biblical basis must be rejected as false or purely subjective, whereas experience for which there is Biblical support may give the believer a deeper personal assurance of his faith. Although it is Scripture, not experience, that is authoritative for faith and life, Scripture and experience go hand in hand in healthy Christian living, for on different levels each confirms the other. It is interesting to note that many charismatics assert that their experience of the Holy Spirit has brought Scripture alive for them in an amazing way.

The stumbling-block of terminology

One approach which tends to sidestep any serious examination of charismatic claims is to criticize as “unbiblical” the theological terms used by charismatics; for example, Paul’s assertion in 1 Corinthians 12:13 that “we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body” is seized upon as “proof” that every Christian was baptized with the Spirit at the time of his conversion (whether or not he was aware of this baptism) and that charismatic claims are therefore unworthy of consideration. Some critics even maintain that the noun form “baptism with the Holy Spirit” is unbiblical; yet if Jesus baptizes with the Spirit, as the Scriptures proclaim (e.g., John 1:33 and Acts 1:5), there must be such a thing as a Spirit-baptism! (The Bible nowhere uses the term “Trinity” either, but theologians find it indispensable.) Criticism of terminology tends merely to avoid the issue of whether there is a major spiritual blessing that many sincere and committed Christians do not seem to have experienced.

Let us for the time being put aside all argumentation about what theological terms should be used to describe experiences of the Holy Spirit such as charismatics claim to have had, and let us first consider whether there is Biblical support for the experiences themselves.

Are there Scriptural parallels?

In Acts there are several examples of direct experiences of the Spirit, each one a little different from the others.

The experience of Cornelius and his group came at the time of their conversion to Christ (10:44-48), while the Samaritans' was some time after their conversion and baptism (8:12-17). The apostles, Cornelius and his group, and the Ephesian "disciples" found themselves speaking words which did not belong to any language known to them (2:4-11; 10:45-46; 19:6), but it is not recorded that the Samaritans and Saul did so when they initially experienced the Spirit (8:17-18; 9:17-18). The apostles, and perhaps some other believers with them, had a powerful experience of the Spirit on at least two occasions (2:1-4; 4:31). The apostles' second experience was in answer to prayer (4:31), and the Samaritans' in answer to prayer with laying on of hands (8:15-17), but the experience of Cornelius and his group came unbidden (10:44). Saul's experience was individual, while the other examples in Acts are of group experiences. The apostles experienced supernatural wind and fire, and later on, supernatural earthquake (2:2-3; 4:31), but no such extraordinary phenomena are recorded in the other examples.

One is forced to admit that there do seem to be parallels in Scripture for the various personal experiences of the Spirit that different charismatics claim to have had.

Is there Biblical support for experiences today?

Some Christians are not convinced that there is Biblical support for direct experiences of the Spirit today, despite the fact that there seem to be parallels for them in Scripture. They take the view that at Pentecost the twelve apostles (and perhaps some other believers) experienced the Holy Spirit on behalf of the whole Church for all time to come, and they therefore regard with the utmost suspicion any suggestion that Christians today may have direct, intimate experiences of the Spirit. They justify the later Samaritan and Gentile experiences recorded in Acts 8 and 10 in terms of the necessity for Samaritan and Gentile missions to be fully validated in the eyes of the church in Jerusalem; and they explain Saul's dramatic experience of physical healing and spiritual empowerment when the scales fell from his eyes (Acts 9:17-20) in terms of his special calling to apostleship.

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It is important to realize that there does not seem to be any Scriptural support for the view that, within the Christian era, direct experiences of the Holy Spirit were to be solely the prerogative of a favoured few in the early days of the Church, and are therefore not available today. Such a view is based mainly on theological speculation concerning exactly what was accomplished in the coming of the Spirit on the apostles at Pentecost. It is true that the first groups of Samaritan and Gentile Christians would have had to experience the Spirit unmistakably, and in the presence of an apostle, for the sake of the complete validation of missions to Samaritans and Gentiles; but can we assume that they otherwise would have had no direct experience of the Spirit, or that they were among only a very favoured few who had such an experience? The weight of evidence is against such assumptions.

If the apostles' experience of the Spirit at Pentecost was on behalf of the whole church for all time to come, why did the apostles themselves need to have that further powerful experience recorded in Acts 4:31? And since the Spirit had already been experienced by groups of Jews, Samaritans (part-Jews), and Gentiles, who together represented the whole of mankind, why did the twelve Ephesian "disciples" of Acts 19 need to have a similar experience when Paul laid his hands on them? It is doubtful whether God's sole purpose in granting them this experience was in order that Luke, the writer of Acts, could use this incident to show that Paul's ministry here was parallel with that of Peter and John among the Samaritans in Acts 8!

Regardless of whether, at the time when Paul found them, the Ephesian "disciples" were Christians or merely followers of John the Baptist, Paul's first question to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when [or *after* (NIV footnote)] you believed?" (19:2) strongly implies the following: (a) at least at first, Paul took them to be Christians; (b) "receiving the Holy Spirit" denotes an experience that one is normally aware of; (c) it is possible for Christians not to have had this experience of the Spirit – as we already know from the Samaritans' conversion (Acts 8), and as is also suggested by Paul's own three-day wait after the Damascus road incident (Acts 9); and (d) it is desirable for Christians to have this experience of the Spirit. It is highly

probable that in Paul's first question there is also the further implication that it was usual for Christians of his time to have such an experience, whether it came at or after conversion. Paul's meeting with the Ephesian "disciples" climaxed in their experience of the Spirit, which did not come, however, till during or after their baptism (Acts 19:5-6).

The Biblical evidence strongly suggests that, among any number of direct experiences of the Spirit which Luke could have chosen to record, he has selected those which best serve the purposes of his narrative of the expansion of the Church from Jerusalem to Rome.

Far from limiting direct experience of the Holy Spirit to a favoured few, Pentecost seems to have signified, among other things, the beginning of the availability of such experience to all believers, irrespective of sex, age, and rank. How different from Old Testament times, when such experiences were the prerogative of very specially favoured people, mainly prophets, priests, or kings! In order to explain the Pentecost experience of the apostles, which seemed to some onlookers like drunkenness, Peter was inspired to quote from Joel's prophecy: "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people" (Acts 2:17); and in view of the later, similar experiences recorded in Acts, Peter could not have been claiming that the whole and final and only fulfilment of this prophecy took place on the day of Pentecost. Since "the last days" will not end until the return of Christ, there is no reason whatsoever to assume that ordinary Christians today cannot experience the Spirit in a way that is akin to the experience of the apostles at Pentecost.

Are modern experiences of the Spirit genuine?

It has been established not only that there are Scriptural parallels for experiences claimed by modern charismatics, but also that there is Biblical support for the availability today of experiences akin to that of the apostles at Pentecost. Nevertheless some Christians, without any Biblical justification, try to restrict the possibility of direct experiences of the Holy Spirit to the time of the apostles and are reluctant to regard as genuine any more modern experiences of this kind. Their doubts are expressed in

such questions as: “Are these people really deceivers, pretending to have had a personal experience of the Holy Spirit in order to appear to be super-Christians? Are they deceived, imagining experiences that have no objective reality? If their experiences are real, are they from God or from Satan?”

Those who regard charismatics as deceivers seize upon a few well-publicized instances of sinful conduct on the part of certain Pentecostal or charismatic leaders. They forget that similarly disgraceful things occur from time to time in more traditional churches, but that these churches often manage to keep such events out of the public media, partly because their image is probably not as controversial. Moreover, the persecution meted out to charismatics in many churches is certainly no incentive for anyone in those churches to pretend to have had a personal experience of the Spirit!

The allegation that so-called experiences of the Spirit today are merely products of the imagination of highly emotional people is a generalization which cannot be sustained in the face of the wide range of personality types, intellectual and educational levels, and social, cultural, and racial backgrounds within the swelling ranks of Pentecostals and charismatics. How can the claims of such men as David du Plessis, Derek Prince, and Reinhard Bonnke be so lightly dismissed? Moreover, the theory that such experiences today are always subjectively manufactured in the imagination of those who desire them fails to take account of the testimonies of those who claim that, although they did not seek such experience, and although, in some cases, they did not even consider that it was available today, yet God graciously granted it to them.

If the experiences claimed by charismatics today had no objective reality, one would not expect them to have objective consequences. However, the vast majority of those charismatics whose experience came later than their conversion are discernibly different in their Christian walk thereafter. Something has happened to them. Is this “something” good or bad? Jesus said, “By their fruit you will recognize them” (Mt. 7:20); and from any unbiased assessment it is obvious that most of them bear better fruit than they did before, particularly in the area of increased power in witnessing for Jesus. Even opponents of the charismatic

claims will usually admit that charismatics are very zealous for the Lord. This is an outcome that Satan most certainly would not want!

Those Christians who try to restrict the possibility of direct experiences of the Spirit to the time of the apostles are often ignorant of the fact that claims to such experiences are recorded in association with many of the great revivals in the history of the Church all down the ages. Three examples must suffice, of which the first is familiar to many – the individual experience of John Wesley on 24th May 1738, when his heart was “strangely warmed”. Less well-known is the event described thus by A. Skevington Wood in *The History of Christianity* (ed. T. Dowley, Lion Publishing, Sutherland, NSW, 1990, p.449):

On 1 January 1739 a remarkable love feast was held at Fetter Lane in London. There the leaders of the Revival were welded into a fellowship of the Spirit in a way similar to what had happened at Herrnhut in 1727. The Wesleys were present, along with Whitefield and Benjamin Ingham, who was to become an outstanding evangelist among the Moravians. ‘About three in the morning, as we were continuing instant in prayer,’ John Wesley recorded in his Journal, ‘the power of God came mightily upon us insomuch that many cried out for exceeding joy and many fell to the ground. As soon as we were recovered a little from that awe and amazement at the presence of His majesty, we broke out with one voice, “We praise Thee, O God, we acknowledge Thee to be the Lord”.’ This Pentecost on New Year’s Day confirmed that the Awakening had come and launched the campaign of extensive evangelization which sprang from it.

Even more amazing is the event which initiated revival on the island of Timor in the twentieth century, and which is described thus in the Publisher’s Foreword to Mel and Nona Tari’s book, *The Gentle Breeze of Jesus* (New Leaf Press, Green Forest, Arkansas, 1978, p.6):

The renewal exploded with full force in the Soe church the night of September 26, 1965, when the New Testament phenomena of the Day of Pentecost were repeated – a tornadolike wind, visible fire (which prompted police in their station across the street to set off the fire alarm and summon volunteer firefighters), and numerous conversions as well as infillings with the Holy Spirit, complete with speaking in tongues,

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including English. By midnight, teams of laymen had been organized to begin spreading the gospel the next day.

The cumulative evidence from Scripture, from Church history, and from the testimony of 600 million Christians around the world today, is very strong. Although one could never assert the genuineness of every claim of a direct experience of the Spirit, it is beyond reasonable doubt that there is indeed available today a major spiritual blessing which is akin to that granted to the apostles at Pentecost and which many sincere and committed Christians do not seem to have experienced. In view of the weight of the evidence for the genuineness of modern direct experiences of the Holy Spirit, and in view of the increasing numbers of Christians making this discovery in a personal way, one can no longer either ignore these experiences or maintain that they are not for today.

What are the results of such an experience?

Although at this stage the word “experience” must still be used in order to avoid theological terms, it is important to realize that God does not grant an experience merely for the sake of the experience itself. The experience is meant to produce results, and from the united testimony of Scripture, Church history, and modern charismatic Christians it is evident that the most obvious result of an experience akin to that of the apostles at Pentecost is a loosing of the tongue – principally an empowerment to witness for Jesus Christ, but often an empowerment to speak in tongues also.

Before His ascension Jesus told the apostles: “Stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:49); “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). When, on the day of Pentecost, the apostles “began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them”, the Jews from different parts of the world exclaimed: “We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” (Acts 2:4,11); and Peter spoke of this phenomenon in terms of a fulfilment of Joel’s prophecy: “Even

on my servants . . . I will pour out my Spirit . . . and they will prophesy” (Acts 2:18). Furthermore, on that day Peter’s own inspired preaching of God’s message (a form of prophecy) resulted in the conversion of about 3,000 people (Acts 2:41)! His words were God’s words because his spirit was completely under the control of the Holy Spirit.

Other Biblical records of direct experiences of the Spirit support this conclusion that the main purpose of such experiences is to confer upon believers a greater ability to speak forth words from God, not in their own strength but by the power of His Spirit. The chief result of the experience of the apostles and other believers after the arrest and release of Peter and John was that they all “spoke the word of God boldly” (Acts 4:31); Saul, immediately after his experience and baptism, “at once . . . began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God” (Acts 9:20); Cornelius and his group spoke in tongues and praised God (Acts 10:46); and the Ephesian “disciples” “spoke in tongues and prophesied” (Acts 19:6). There is no precise indication of the result of the Samaritans’ experience, but it was visible to Simon the Sorcerer, who coveted the ability to bring such a change to people (Acts 8:18-19). Whether or not we are called to preach, we as Christians must “always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks [us] to give the reason for the hope that [we] have” (1 Peter 3:15). The amazing growth of the early Church came largely through the oral witness of ordinary believers, as is clear from such passages as Acts 11:19-21.

After direct experiences of the Spirit, believers are often more fully equipped than before to minister to people in various ways, in addition to witnessing for Jesus. Jesus Himself did not begin His ministry till after the Holy Spirit had descended on Him like a dove, and He described this ministry not only as preaching but also as healing and meeting every kind of human need in the power of the Spirit (Luke 3:21-23; 4:18-19). When addressing Cornelius and his group, Peter spoke of “how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him” (Acts 10:38). It is significant that after the release of Peter and John, when the apostles and other believers prayed for great boldness of speech

and for healings and miraculous signs and wonders through the name of Jesus, the Lord's response was to grant all of them an empowering experience of the Spirit (Acts 4:29-31); and although at first we are told only that they all "spoke the word of God boldly", we find later that the performance of healings and miracles was not the prerogative of the apostles alone. "Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people" (Acts 6:8); and Philip the Evangelist did miraculous signs in Samaria (Acts 8:6-7).

Although in the New Testament "grace" (unmerited favour) usually speaks of God's love in sending His Son to save us, it sometimes speaks of God's power bestowed upon believers for the purpose of ministry. "We have different gifts, according to the grace given us", and "each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms" (Rom. 12:6; 1 Peter 4:10). Since a direct experience of the Holy Spirit is primarily for the purpose of empowerment for Christian witness and service, it ordinarily results in an increase in the number of spiritual gifts and/or increased effectiveness in the use of gifts already given. Usually one of the factors is a release from inhibiting traits such as shyness and also from bondages imposed by man-made traditions, for "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Cor. 3:17).

What descriptive terms should be used?

Much misunderstanding has occurred among Christians for many years over terminology relating to experiences of the Spirit. The simple solution would seem to be: to describe such experiences, use any of the terms that the Bible uses. Direct experiences of the Spirit recorded in Acts are described in the following ways:

(a) the apostles (and others?):

"baptized with the Holy Spirit", the Greek for which may also be translated "baptized in the Holy Spirit" (1:5; 11:16); "the Holy Spirit comes on you" (1:8); "filled with the Holy Spirit" (2:4); "I [God] will pour out my Spirit" (2:17,18); "he [Jesus] . . . has poured out what you now see and hear" (2:33);

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(b) *the apostles and others:*

“filled with the Holy Spirit” (4:31);

(c) *the Samaritans:*

“the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any”, or AV “as yet he was fallen upon none” (8:16); “receive(d) the Holy Spirit” (8:15,17); “the Spirit was given” (8:18);

(d) *Saul:*

“filled with the Holy Spirit” (9:17);

(e) *Cornelius and his group:*

“the Holy Spirit came on all”, or AV “the Holy Ghost fell on all” (10:44); “the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out” (10:45); “received the Holy Spirit” (10:47); “the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us”, or AV “the Holy Ghost fell on them, as on us” (11:15); “God gave them the same gift as he gave us” (11:17);

(f) *the Ephesians:*

“receive the Holy Spirit” (19:2); “the Holy Spirit came on them” (19:6).

It is highly unlikely that we are meant to make fine distinctions of meaning among the different expressions, especially since the one event is sometimes described in several ways. However, the descriptions do reveal that what is basically the one experience has an outer and an inner aspect. The outer aspect is expressed in the imagery either of gift-giving or of baptism (for, like water, the Spirit is poured out or falls or comes on people). The inner aspect is expressed in the imagery of receiving or being filled. Clearly, it is with Biblical justification that charismatics today tend to use all of these expressions interchangeably to describe their empowerment by the Holy Spirit. In addition, some describe it as an “anointing” with the Spirit, for the Bible speaks of God anointing Jesus with the Spirit for His ministry (Luke 4:18; Acts 10:38). However, when the Bible speaks of believers receiving an anointing from the Lord, it may not always be referring to an empowerment for ministry (cf. 2 Cor. 1:21 and 1 John 2:20,27).

The freedom with which charismatics describe empowering experiences of the Spirit in any of the terms used for them in the Bible, may unfortunately cause misunderstanding with those who

hold different interpretations of certain passages of Scripture. Let us briefly look at some common problems of terminology, always remembering that reality is far more important than terms used to express it.

Baptized with (or in) the Spirit

Some believers are accustomed to thinking of the word “baptism” as always signifying a Christian initiation or beginning, and are therefore offended by the implication that not all Christians have been Spirit-baptized. They fail to understand that charismatics are using the term “Spirit-baptism”, not to signify being born of the Spirit (saved), but to signify an experience of the Spirit that initiates one into more fully empowered witness and service. Those who have had more than one such experience usually use this term to refer to their first experience only.

Those who seek to restrict the term “Spirit-baptism” to the time of conversion point out that in Acts it is only the experience of the apostles at Pentecost for which the expression “baptized with the Holy Spirit” is used (1:5; 11:16). But were the apostles born again, in a Christian rather than a pre-Christian sense, *before* Pentecost or *at* Pentecost? They were in a unique historical situation, and it is not possible to be dogmatic on this point, particularly in the light of John’s record that on the evening of His resurrection day, Jesus appeared to His disciples and “breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’” (20:22). There are mysteries here that we cannot fathom. Possibly, the apostles first truly became Christians at Pentecost, but the Bible does not clearly say this. In Acts, Luke is more concerned with that operation of the Spirit which empowers believers for ministry than with that operation by which He brings people to new birth.

One very real problem with trying to use the term “Spirit-baptism” for the new birth is that the expression “baptized with the Holy Spirit” is one of a cluster of closely related images which are used for empowering experiences of the Spirit, regardless of whether they occurred at the same time as new birth or not. In Jesus’ words to the apostles before His ascension He makes it clear that being baptized with (or in) the Spirit is the same as the Spirit coming on one (Acts 1:4-8); yet this same

image of “coming on” is used not only in relation to Cornelius and his group, whose experience occurred at the same time as conversion, but also in relation to the Samaritans and the Ephesian “disciples”, whose experiences took place after conversion (Acts 10:44 and 11:15; 8:16; 19:5-6).

When Paul asserts that “we were all baptized by [or *with*; or *in* (NIV footnote)] one Spirit into one body” (1 Cor. 12:13), he is obviously referring to some kind of incorporation of Christians into the Body of Christ, some kind of union with Him as part of His Body; but the exact meaning is not clear. The baptism he is referring to could be baptism with water, made effectual by the Holy Spirit; or it could be the new birth, although he would then be using the concept of Spirit-baptism with a different meaning from that in Acts; or, as in Acts, it could be Spirit-baptism in the sense of an empowerment with the Spirit for service. However, in this last case we cannot assume that Paul is asserting that all Christians are Spirit-empowered for service, because by “we . . . all” he may be referring only to himself and the Corinthian Christians, to whom he has already said, “You do not lack any spiritual gift” (1 Cor. 1:7).

In his book *Joy Unspeakable: The Baptism with the Holy Spirit* (Kingsway Publications, Eastbourne, 1984, p.270), D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones pointed out that the view that equated Spirit-baptism with the new birth had gained ground among evangelicals only within about the previous one hundred years, yet in many denominations this view had become enshrined unofficially, and sometimes even officially, as the orthodox view.

In support of this view, Peter’s words in Acts 2:38 are often quoted: “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” Since Peter uses the term “gift”, he was probably referring to empowerment rather than indwelling (cf. Acts 1:4-5). But is the Lord really promising that every Christian will be baptized with the Spirit? Peter goes on to say that “the promise [of the Spirit] is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call” (Acts 2:39). However, Lloyd-Jones (*Joy Unspeakable*, pp.170-173) asserts that “all the promises of God are always conditional – invariably”, and convincingly argues that “all Peter

is saying [in Acts 2:38-39] is this: if you repent and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ you are a candidate for these promises. . . . You are then in a position to receive the gift that we the apostles have already received.” He concludes that “we must never interpret Acts 2:38-39 as teaching that automatically everybody who repents and believes, is baptized with the Holy Spirit.”

Faced with the dilemma that in many denominations Spirit-baptism tends to be equated with the new birth, some charismatics whose experience of the Spirit did not come till after their conversion have proposed the theory that they were non-experientially baptized with the Spirit at the time of their conversion, but were not “released in the Spirit” to experience that Spirit-baptism and its full benefits till later on. Although the term “released in the Spirit” is unbiblical, it does express something of that greater freedom and boldness which most Christians have after a direct experience of the Spirit.

Giving and receiving the Spirit

The problem with expressions about the “giving” of the Spirit and “receiving” the Spirit is similar to the problem with “Spirit-baptism”. Since Pentecost it is certainly not possible to belong to Christ without also having the Holy Spirit. When Paul says, “If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ”, the context makes it plain that he is referring to the indwelling of the Spirit (Rom. 8:9-11). It is by His Spirit that Jesus is in us, and we are in Him. Since all Christians have the Holy Spirit indwelling them, how is it possible for some to be “given” the Spirit, or “receive” the Spirit, after conversion? Yet these expressions are used not only in relation to Cornelius and his group, whose empowering experience occurred at the same time as conversion, but also in relation to the Samaritans and the Ephesian “disciples”, whose experiences took place after conversion (Acts 10:47 and 11:17; 8:15-18; 19:2-6).

It is important to understand that, just as the operations of the Holy Spirit transcend human logic, so too do the expressions for them. One may have the Spirit, in the sense of being indwelt by the Spirit, without having been “given”, or having “received”, the Spirit; and this is merely because in Acts Luke specifically relates

these latter expressions to experiencing the Spirit in an empowering way. Jesus promised the apostles, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you” (Acts 1:8), and it seems that “receiving the Spirit” is an abbreviated form of the concept of receiving the power of the Spirit. However, it is not clear in what sense the disciples “received” the Spirit when Jesus breathed on them after His resurrection and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (John 20:22).

Filled with the Spirit

Non-charismatic Christians probably find the expression “filled with the Spirit” less offensive than the other main ways of referring to a full empowerment by the Spirit; yet even with this expression there are serious difficulties.

Some Christians fail to make any distinction between being indwelt by the Spirit and being filled with the Spirit, and thus are offended by the suggestion that not all Christians are Spirit-filled. If all Christians were Spirit-filled there would be no point in descriptions such as “Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them”, or “Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up” (Acts 4:8; 7:55); and there would have been no need for Saul, after his conversion, to be filled with the Spirit when Ananias laid his hands on him (Acts 9:17). There is a further complication, too. Those who have been baptized or filled with the Spirit do not automatically remain “filled” or “full”, and therefore one cannot assert that a Christian is “Spirit-filled” or “full of the Spirit” merely because he had an empowering experience of the Spirit at some point in the past. After the threats of the Jewish authorities, the apostles and other believers needed to be refilled in order to preach the gospel boldly (Acts 4:31).

While some believers are under the misapprehension that all Christians are Spirit-filled, a far greater number tend to be shocked by what they consider arrogance on the part of anyone who claims to have been filled with the Spirit. This serious difficulty arises from the fact that the expression “filled with the Spirit” has different meanings for different groups of Christians. For charismatics, it usually means suddenly empowered with the Spirit for witness and service; for non-charismatics, it usually

means gradually sanctified or made holy by the Spirit. A charismatic who speaks of his experience of being filled with the Spirit is not claiming to be holier than a Christian who has not had such an experience. Although a person is sometimes completely delivered from a particular sin at a particular time, sanctification is in general a gradual process in the life of the believer as the indwelling Holy Spirit produces “the fruit of the Spirit” – “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23).

Whereas fruit needs time to grow, gifts are simply given. After a filling or empowerment with the Spirit, a Christian finds that suddenly he has more spiritual gifts than before, or an increased ability to use gifts already given. Of course, fruit and gifts cannot be completely separated. They are meant to work together, and if the gifts are exercised without the fruit of the Spirit, they are not a good witness to the holiness of Christ: “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal” (1 Cor. 13:1). Moreover, being baptized or filled with the Spirit should give a boost to the growth of spiritual fruit in a Christian’s life because of his sheer gratitude to the Lord; and Luke may intend to imply that the unity and joyful sharing of possessions among the early believers in Jerusalem were due in part to their being filled with the Spirit (Acts 4:31-37). Sometimes, too, the Spirit suddenly bestows a supernaturally intense joy such as Jesus experienced after the return of the seventy-two, when, “full of joy through the Holy Spirit”, He burst forth into praise of His Father (Luke 10:21). Nevertheless, there is not necessarily any direct relationship between being filled with the Spirit, and the level of sanctification or spiritual maturity. In order to be equipped as a prophet, John the Baptist was “filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth” (Luke 1:15); and we know from Paul’s letters that the Christians at Corinth, though rich in spiritual gifts, were far from mature in holiness.

The different understandings of the meaning of “filled with the Spirit” arise mainly from Paul’s exhortation: “Do not get drunk on wine . . . Instead, be filled with the Spirit” (Eph. 5:18). In the Greek, “be filled with the Spirit” means literally “be being filled with the Spirit”, thereby seemingly showing that being

filled with the Spirit is the continuous lifelong process of being made holy. But is Paul referring mainly to sanctification? If he is, then his terminology is clearly different from Luke's in the many references to Spirit-filling in both Luke and Acts. Another and more likely explanation appears when Ephesians 5:18-20, which is one sentence in Greek, is interpreted as a unit, and when it is realized that in Greek, "be being filled" can signify a repeated action instead of a continuous action. As we have seen, even the apostles, whom some thought drunk at Pentecost, needed to be filled with the Spirit again (Acts 4:31). What Paul probably means is: "Do not think you are full now merely because you have had an initial filling, or full empowerment, at some time in the past; but go on having repeated fillings with the Spirit." In the rest of this passage he seems to indicate that employing loosed tongues to speak to one another "with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs", to sing to the Lord, and always to give Him thanks, is not only a result, but also a means, of being repeatedly empowered by the Spirit (Eph. 5:19-20). The more we use God's gifts, the more gifts He is likely to give us; and the more we bless God, the more He will bless us.

Regardless of his precise meaning, Paul's exhortation to "be being filled with the Spirit" is a salutary reminder that an initial filling, no matter how fully it may empower a believer for witness and service, does not do away with the necessity to go on walking in the Spirit and being filled with the Spirit. Christians need to be under the control of the Holy Spirit and empowered by Him at all times.

Have I been baptized (filled) with the Spirit?

When a Christian advances beyond the stage of being strung up on the hurdle of theological debates over terminology, he often comes to a firm conviction of the reality and present availability of direct, full empowerments with the Holy Spirit for witness and service. Naturally, the question that he then asks himself is: "Have I been baptized (or filled) with the Spirit?"

Usually, the experience itself is overwhelming and the results are evident, so the answer seems clear-cut for many. But regardless of whether there has been an overwhelming

experience, those who have suddenly begun to speak in an unknown tongue either at or after conversion, and also those who, after conversion, have suddenly received a greatly increased ability to witness for Christ with boldness and freedom, have almost certainly been baptized with the Spirit.

For others, the answer may not be clear-cut. Some have had the ability to witness boldly for Christ from the time of their conversion, and it may not be clear whether their conversion experience included Spirit-baptism. We must be careful not to be too dogmatic about which Christians have been baptized with the Spirit and which have not.

Far more important than the sometimes-academic question: “Have I been baptized (or filled) with the Spirit?” is the question: “Am I now full of the Spirit?” Regardless of how overwhelming an original experience of Spirit-baptism may have been, or how evident its results in the past, we are leaky vessels that from time to time need to be refilled for service in the power of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, Paul’s exhortation to “be being filled with the Spirit” seems to indicate also that it may be dangerous to regard oneself as “full”, because the Lord wants us always to seek more of His power for His service.

Do you want a baptism (filling) with the Spirit?

Strangely, there are some Christians who, though convinced of the availability of full empowerment with the Spirit for the Lord’s service, fail to seek it. There are many possible reasons for this.

Some are content to remain at their present level of commitment rather than be given a further privilege that might then place further responsibility upon them. They need to pray for greater zeal for God and greater trust in His love and power. He understands all our circumstances, and sometimes He merely asks people to minister more effectively within their own households.

Some do not realize their importance in the Lord’s sight, and thus find it difficult to believe that He would want to fill them (and not only others) with His Spirit and use them in His service. However, the Bible makes it clear that God wants all His people fully equipped for service.

Some are too proud to seek Spirit-baptism for themselves. They find it difficult to come to the point of fully admitting their need to the Lord, to others, or even to themselves. They prefer to go on trying to serve the Lord mainly in their own strength.

One of the most common reasons for failure to seek Spirit-baptism is fear – fear of change, fear of a direct experience of the Spirit, fear of the possibility of speaking in tongues. “But perfect love drives out fear” (1 John 4:18), and as we come to love and trust God more, we can relax in the knowledge that He knows us thoroughly and that His gifts will always be good for us.

Behind everything that holds Christians back from seeking to be filled with the Spirit stands the Evil One. He hates to see people becoming Christians; but if they do become Christians, he then uses every ploy to try to stop them from being fully empowered for Christian witness and service. He wants the Church to be powerless.

Being baptized (filled) with the Holy Spirit

Sometimes the Lord sovereignly baptizes people with the Spirit without their even asking for it, just as He did for Cornelius and his group (Acts 10:44-46). More often, though, some prayer is involved, as in the case of the Samaritans (Acts 8:14-17); and Jesus Himself has promised that our Father in heaven will “give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him” (Luke 11:13).

When a person decides to pray to be filled with the Spirit, he must be sure that he is indeed a child of God through repentance for sin and faith in Christ as Lord and Saviour. He must also be sure of what he is seeking – full empowerment for witness and service. If he is seeking experience for the sake of experience, he will probably be disappointed. If he thinks that the filling with the Spirit for which he is asking is some kind of instant sanctification, then he will almost certainly be disappointed, and it is doubtful whether he will receive empowerment for service either, since God knows the desires of our hearts and what we mean by our words.

As with all prayers of petition, we should pray with faith and earnestness, desiring to receive all that God has for us, in order to serve Him better. A Christian sometimes finds it helpful to ask

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someone who has been fully empowered with the Holy Spirit to pray with him as he asks Jesus to fill him, too, with His Spirit. Laying on of hands, though not essential, may further encourage faith, and is thoroughly Biblical in this situation (see, e.g., Acts 9:17).

One thing is certain: when a person is baptized (or filled) with the Holy Spirit, another dimension of the Christian life is opened up to him, and he is enabled to go forward in greater freedom, exercising more of God's gifts in the service of His Kingdom.

The Gifts of the Spirit

What are spiritual gifts?

Both believers and unbelievers are given natural talents; but in order that the Church might carry out its ministry effectively, God supplies members with spiritual gifts, or special abilities for service. Such gifts differ from natural talents dedicated to God, though they may be exercised through the channel of natural talents, as when evangelism is exercised through singing. In practice it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between the elements of natural talent and spiritual gift in tasks such as Bible teaching and church administration, but where there is only natural talent there is a lack of ability to bring spiritual blessing and growth.

Various spiritual gifts and ministries are listed in Romans 12:6-8 (called “motivational gifts” by some), in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10 and 28-30, and in Ephesians 4:11 (often called “ministry gifts”); and there is no indication that these lists are exhaustive. The gifts of serving or helping, teaching, encouraging, giving, administration or leadership, showing mercy, evangelism, and pastoring do not arouse theological controversy; and most Christians agree that if the gift of apostleship is still available, it is not in its original form or with its original degree of authority. However, there is much controversy about the nature and present availability of the nine gifts listed in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10: word of wisdom, word of knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, discerning of spirits, tongues, and interpretation of

tongues (AV terminology). Most charismatics believe that this is a list of the more supernatural gifts only, and that all of them are still available today. Some charismatics use the term “spiritual gifts” or “gifts of the Spirit” to refer to these nine gifts alone.

The most obvious feature of charismatic Christianity is its refusal to be restricted to only the seemingly more ordinary gifts. Charismatic churches usually claim to be using the whole range of New Testament gifts and ministries, except perhaps apostleship. Indeed, the word “charismatic” is derived from the most frequent New Testament term for spiritual gifts, “charismata”. This term implies that they are expressions of divine grace, and thus reminds us that neither the servants nor the ones served deserve these gifts, because they show God’s unmerited favour toward us.

The relationship of Spirit-baptism and gifts

When a Christian is baptized (or filled) with the Holy Spirit he is given more “grace”, in the sense of God’s power for the purpose of ministry; and both Paul and Peter speak of spiritual gifts as the expression of different forms of grace (Rom. 12:6; 1 Peter 4:10). There is, then, an essential link between Spirit-baptism and spiritual gifts. Each filling with the Spirit further empowers for witness and service, thereby resulting ordinarily in an increase in the number of gifts and/or increased effectiveness of gifts already given.

God is sovereign in the distribution of gifts, for the Spirit “gives them to each one, just as he determines” (1 Cor. 12:11). There is no clear Scriptural promise that Spirit-baptism always results in the giving of one or more of the nine gifts listed in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10; but Scripture does clearly indicate that any Christian who has received from the Lord the ability to speak in an unknown tongue has indeed been baptized (or filled) with the Spirit, for it was the evidence of tongues that convinced Peter and other Jewish Christians with him that Cornelius and his group had “received the Holy Spirit” just as they themselves had (Acts 10:44-47; 11:15-17). Although there is no clear Scriptural teaching that only those who have been baptized with the Spirit may receive any of the other eight gifts listed in 1 Corinthians

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12:8-10, in practice some, or perhaps all, of these gifts (depending on definitions) are just as rare as tongues in those churches which do not encourage prayer for full empowerment with the Holy Spirit. The fact that only the gifts in this particular list are referred to as “the manifestation of the Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:7) may perhaps imply a special link between Spirit-baptism and these particular gifts.

Some Christians would like to be filled with the Spirit, but fear speaking in tongues. Prior to Pentecost there is no mention of people speaking in other languages when they were filled or empowered with the Spirit, though their tongues were usually loosed in prophecy and praise, as were those of Elizabeth and Zechariah (Luke 1:41-45, 67-79). In Acts, however, tongues are mentioned in three of the five accounts of initial fillings with the Spirit (2:4; 8:17-18; 9:17-18; 10:44-47; and 19:6). Since Pentecost, it seems that one is fairly likely (if one wishes) to have the ability to speak in tongues, at least for private prayer, after being empowered with the Spirit; but it is probable that this gift is often suppressed, sometimes unconsciously, by potential speakers who do not want to receive it. The Holy Spirit does not force people to do anything against their wills, but His gifts are always good for us, and tongues-speaking strengthens the speaker: “He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself” (1 Cor. 14:4). Tongues-speakers claim that even though they do not ordinarily understand what they are saying, their conviction, commitment, and love are deepened, and their power to minister is increased, by the practice of praying in tongues. No wonder Paul says, “I would like every one of you to speak in tongues”, and “I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you” (1 Cor. 14:5,18)! When we ask the Lord to fill us with His Spirit, we should desire to receive all that He wants to give us, instead of trying to prevent Him from giving us particular gifts.

There is much controversy about the closeness of the relationship between Spirit-baptism and tongues. Some believe that, since Pentecost, everyone who has been baptized with the Spirit has been given the ability to speak in tongues, and that if he cannot do this, it is only because he is suppressing the gift, consciously or unconsciously. There is no clear Biblical teaching, one way or the other, concerning this theory. Some try to counter

it with Paul's question, "Do all speak in tongues?" (1 Cor. 12:30), which implies the answer "No"; but in this context there is no reference to private prayer language for one's own edification. Rather, Paul is reminding the Corinthians that not everyone has a ministry of giving utterances in tongues when the church is assembled. Similarly, "tongues", when listed as one of nine gifts given to different members "for the common good", must refer to public tongues-speaking (1 Cor. 12:7-11).

Though God is sovereign in the distribution of gifts, Paul tells us to seek spiritual gifts, especially those which build up the church: "Eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy"; "He who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may be edified"; "Try to excel in gifts that build up the church"; "Anyone who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret what he says"; "Be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues" (1 Cor. 14:1,5,12,13,39). Some Christians deduce from this that it is wrong to seek the gift of tongues; but Paul is merely emphasizing that prophecy and interpretation of tongues are superior to uninterpreted public tongues-speaking. It surely cannot be wrong to seek a private prayer tongue that edifies us, as long as we seek more keenly for gifts that are of greater benefit to others.

Though we should pray for spiritual gifts and be willing to receive whatever God has for us, His glory must always be our chief motivation. We need to seek the Giver more than the gifts and treasure our relationship with Christ above all else.

When are the supernatural gifts to cease?

Before dealing with the question of the cessation of the supernatural gifts, we must consider which spiritual gifts are supernatural. There is a sense in which all the special abilities that God bestows upon Christians for ministry to the Body of Christ are supernatural, since they differ from merely natural talents; but most believers would agree that healing, miracles, discerning of spirits, tongues, and interpretation of tongues are supernatural in a stricter sense.

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Not everybody agrees about the nature of the other four gifts listed in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10 – word of wisdom, word of knowledge, faith, and prophecy – but it is a fair assumption that in this context they too refer to the supernatural realm in the stricter sense. All Christians have saving faith, and most also learn to trust the Lord for the more ordinary needs of life; so it is probable that this gift of faith is the special ability to trust God in more spectacular ways, as for healings and miracles – “a faith that can move mountains” (1 Cor. 13:2). The probability that the wisdom, knowledge, and prophecy to which Paul is here referring involve direct revelation imparted by the Holy Spirit is supported by the following references: “What good will I be to you, unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction?”; “Everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation”; “If a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop” (1 Cor. 14:6,26,30). What we are dealing with, then, is the question of when the nine gifts listed as “the manifestation of the Spirit” are to cease (1 Cor. 12:7).

Paul classifies the supernatural gifts into three categories – faith, speech, and knowledge. He tells the Corinthians he is thankful that “in [Christ] you have been enriched in every way – in all your speaking and in all your knowledge . . . Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift” (1 Cor. 1:5-7); and he also exhorts them: “Just as you excel in everything – in faith, in speech, in knowledge . . . – see that you also excel in this grace of giving” (2 Cor. 8:7). Presumably, in the broader sense “faith” includes faith, healing, and miracles; “speech” includes prophecy, tongues, and interpretation of tongues; and “knowledge” includes word of wisdom, word of knowledge, and discerning of spirits.

In 1 Corinthians 13 Paul teaches that prophecy, tongues, and knowledge will all disappear “when perfection comes” (vv.8-10); and there is the clear implication that “a faith that can move mountains” (v.2) will no longer be necessary then, either, any more than voluntary poverty and martyrdom (v.3). It is obvious that “when perfection comes”, all nine supernatural gifts will cease. When tongues cease, so must interpretation of tongues; with knowledge would go wisdom and discerning of spirits (and in any case one of the main functions of this last gift will be

superfluous when revelatory messages cease); and with extraordinary faith would go healing and miracles. But when will “perfection” come?

Paul says that when “perfection” comes, our knowledge will be complete (vv.9-10), we shall be mature (v.11), “we shall see face to face” instead of a poor reflection, and we shall “know fully”, just as we are “fully known” – presumably by the Lord (v.12). By the time we reach verse 12, it has become obvious that Paul is referring to the Lord’s return, when perfect knowledge will be given. We still “know in part” and “perfection” has not yet come, so we should expect all the supernatural gifts still to be operating in the Church. Paul’s teaching is plain: the supernatural gifts will cease when Christ returns. Only then will they be no longer needed.

That the reference is to Christ’s return is confirmed by another passage in this same letter: “Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:7-8). With confidence, then, we can declare that all the spiritual gifts may operate, whenever the Lord chooses, right up till Christ returns.

Why do some believe certain gifts have ceased?

Many Christians who assert that the supernatural gifts have ceased base their opinion mainly on 1 Corinthians 13, the very chapter in which Paul teaches that such gifts will cease only when Christ returns! The problem is caused by what the vast majority of Bible scholars now recognize to be misinterpretations of what “perfection” means in Paul’s statement that “when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears” (v.10). One misinterpretation is that “perfection” refers to the maturity of the later Church, as contrasted with the immaturity of the early Church which needed “childish ways” such as supernatural gifts; but in the broader context it is clear that Paul uses the illustration, “When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me” (v.11), to mean that, when Christ returns, supernatural gifts will seem childish to us by comparison with the perfect knowledge that will then be given. A closely related misinterpretation is that “perfection” refers to the

completion of the canon of New Testament Scripture. The erroneousness of these two views becomes obvious when we consider whether any Christian today would dare to claim that he sees “face to face” and knows “fully, even as [he is] fully known” (v.12).

Other Christians who assert that the supernatural gifts have ceased tend to ignore Paul’s teaching to the contrary in 1 Corinthians 13, and base their opinion mainly on the opening of the letter to the Hebrews: “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son” (1:1-2). The writer is declaring that before the time of Christ, God often spoke to His people through the various kinds of partial and incomplete revelation given to the Old Testament writers; but that the coming of Christ has inaugurated a new era in which God has spoken to us fully through His own Son, through whom has come the final revelation before His return at the end of the age. The prophecies of the Old Testament are fulfilled in Christ, who is Himself God’s full and final revelation.

Even though the writer to the Hebrews says that God has already spoken His last Word for this age, evangelical Christians, whether charismatic or not, are united in their belief that this final revelation is interpreted and expressed in authoritative written form in the New Testament as a whole, including the letter to the Hebrews and other books written after it. The Old Testament was already a completed, authoritative collection by Jesus’ time; and as the Holy Spirit continued to work in the hearts of God’s people, they came to accept the books of the New Testament as well as the Old as God’s Word, to submit to their divine authority, and to collect them together, excluding other writings. The canon of New Testament Scripture was officially fixed in the fourth century, and some Christians find it difficult to understand how anybody could legitimately claim to have any further revelation from the Lord thereafter – more especially since all the New Testament books were written almost certainly by apostles or close associates of apostles. Christ gave the Twelve (with Judas replaced by Matthias), Paul, and perhaps James (the Lord’s brother) full authority to act on His behalf, and they became the foundation of the Church in a sense secondary only to that of

Christ Himself. Apostolic authority, which is really Christ's authority, is now exercised through the completed Scriptures. How, then, can the supernatural gifts still function?

However, when we reflect on the implications of the theory that the completion of the canon automatically excludes any further exercise of supernatural gifts, we are led to wonder how these gifts could legitimately have functioned in New Testament times through anybody except Christ and the apostles. If the exercise of these gifts would now be competing with the apostolic authority of the Scriptures, would it not have been competing also with the authority of the apostles during their lifetimes? Yet Paul encourages the proper use of all such gifts as part of the worship of individual congregations.

A related problem posed by the beginning of Hebrews is that it appears to consign to the pre-Christian past, and not merely to the early Church, the "various ways" in which God revealed Himself to and through the "prophets", the Old Testament writers; and these ways included healings, miracles, prophecies, and visions (often a part of the prophetic gift). All of these are found in the New Testament also, both before and after Pentecost, and the recorded examples are not restricted to the ministry of Christ and the apostles. After Pentecost, Philip the Evangelist and Ananias performed healings (Acts 8:7; 9:17-18); Stephen, Philip the Evangelist, and Barnabas performed miracles (Acts 6:8; 8:6,13; 14:3); Agabus, Judas called Barsabbas, Silas, and the four daughters of Philip the Evangelist all prophesied (Acts 11:28; 21:11; 15:22,32; 21:8-9); and Ananias and Cornelius had visions (Acts 9:10-16; 10:3-6). Joel's prophecy quoted by Peter at Pentecost is relevant here:

In the last days, God says,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your young men will see visions,
your old men will dream dreams (Acts 2:17).

Since "the last days" will not end until the return of Christ, one would assume from Joel's prophecy that revelatory gifts are available to ordinary Christians now, as they were to those in the early Church; and this assumption agrees with Paul's teaching in

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1 Corinthians 12-14. It is clear that some false conclusions have commonly been drawn from the opening words of Hebrews: “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son”.

The key to reconciling the opening of Hebrews with Joel’s prophecy, the teaching of 1 Corinthians 12-14, and the exercise of supernatural gifts in the New Testament Church, is to understand that there are different kinds of revelation with different degrees of authority. The opening of Hebrews is referring to that inspired revelation meant to become part of Scripture. As the very Word of God written, it is infallible, inerrant, and absolutely authoritative for both faith and life. It is redemptive revelation, in that the general theme of every book either deals with or has some relevance to God’s grand plan for the redemption of mankind through Christ. In Old Testament times it came through prophets, to whom God gave fragmentary glimpses of His plan by such means as manifestations of Himself, healings, miracles, dreams, visions, prophecies, and interpretations of events. In New Testament times it came through apostles or their close associates, to whom God gave a full view of His plan by means of the Person, life, teachings, death, resurrection, and ascension of His own Son. The apostles had to have seen the risen Christ so that they could bear witness to the resurrection.

On the other hand, Joel’s prophecy quoted by Peter, and the teaching of 1 Corinthians 12-14, refer to a different type of revelation altogether; and the exercise of revelatory gifts in the New Testament Church illustrates this difference. Unless spoken by an apostle, prophecies in a known or an unknown language, and words of wisdom and knowledge, were not regarded as infallible, inerrant, or authoritative, for it was understood that they were usually not the very words of God. They had to be tested in the light of Old Testament Scripture and of apostolic teaching, and the gift of discerning of spirits had to be exercised by the leaders so as to judge whether the utterance was really from the Lord (1 Cor. 12:3; 14:29; 1 John 4:1-3). Such revelation was not redemptive, for instead of giving new insights into God’s plan for man’s redemption, it encouraged or warned or guided an individual or a group through a prediction such as Agabus’s

prediction of a famine (Acts 11:28), through an indication of the will of God in a given situation, as when the Holy Spirit indicated that Barnabas and Saul were to be set apart for a special task (Acts 13:1-2), or through a strengthening and comforting message (1 Cor. 14:3), often perhaps in the nature of a timely reminder of God's love and faithfulness even in the midst of a hostile environment.

The canon of Scripture is now closed, but God continues to give the lesser kind of revelation today through the exercise of gifts, just as Paul envisaged; and many churches which are open to such gifts are experiencing great blessing and growth. God reveals nothing new today concerning doctrine or ethics, and messages must be tested in the light of the completed Scriptures and with the aid of the gift of discerning of spirits. The exercise of revelatory gifts does not compete with the authority of the Scriptures, and nor may anything be added to Scripture.

The "faith" gifts are not revelatory in the same sense as the "speech" and "knowledge" gifts are, but they do usually reveal God's power and love. They are not as uncommon today as is sometimes imagined, since in some churches healings are witnessed frequently, and miracles such as the multiplication of food or the raising of somebody from the dead are not unknown. Like the revelatory gifts, "faith" gifts often bring great blessing and growth to the churches where they are practised; and in addition, in evangelistic situations they have the special function of "confirming the word" that has been preached so as to help people to believe the gospel. This practice of believing that God will confirm His word by signs is thoroughly Biblical. At Iconium Paul and Barnabas spoke boldly for the Lord, "who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders" (Acts 14:3); and the writer to the Hebrews asserts that "This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will" (2:3-4).

Those Christians who believe that there can be no genuine gifts of healing and miracles today usually argue that these gifts are no longer needed because the message of salvation through Christ has already been confirmed by the signs performed by

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Christ and the apostles. They insist that there is a finality about the statement at the end of Mark: “Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it” (16:20).

There are many problems with this position, quite apart from the textual doubtfulness of Mark 16:9-20. Healing and miracles are often needed to relieve human distress, so they are not performed only for the purpose of confirming the word. Moreover, God confirmed His word by signs precisely so that people would not have to believe only what other people said, and the very nature of such confirmation demands that it be repeatable for each generation and in each new missionary situation. Indeed, in the same section of Mark we are told that the gift of healing is a sign that will accompany those who believe the message preached by the Eleven (16:15-18), and we know from the record in Acts that it certainly was not restricted to these original disciples. Finally, any attempt to restrict the practice of any of the supernatural gifts to apostolic times ignores Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 13 that such gifts will cease when Christ returns.

The proper use of spiritual gifts

All spiritual gifts, whether more or less supernatural, are to be used to glorify God and to serve others. We should not neglect our gifts because of false humility or timidity; if the Lord gives someone the gift of evangelism and asks him to share the Good News on a street corner, dare he refuse? On the other hand, we should not display our gifts to glorify ourselves, like a preacher taking pride in his own expressive abilities, or a church member promoting himself through serving. However, it is the more spectacular gifts that seem to lend themselves more readily to the glorification of users who are not sufficiently on guard against the wiles of the Devil. The more spectacular the gift, the more important it is to “test the spirits to see whether they are from God” (1 John 4:1).

When gifts such as prophecy and tongues are used in a congregation today, it is well to observe the guidelines which Paul laid down to correct abuses in the Corinthian church: “If anyone speaks in a tongue, two – or at the most three – should

speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. . . . Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said” (1 Cor. 14:27,29). However, his ruling that “If there is no interpreter, the speaker should . . . speak to himself and God” (1 Cor. 14:28) shows that an interpretation is not necessary when a tongue is being used in private prayer. Evidently, the speaker’s spiritual understanding of what the Holy Spirit is accomplishing through his tongue is sufficient for his prayer of praise or supplication to be acceptable to the Lord.

When God is being truly glorified in the use of a spiritual gift, it follows that others are being truly served. Paul’s great chapter on love, 1 Corinthians 13, puts the gifts into perspective and provides a model for exercising them with a great deal of sensitivity to the needs of others. To disregard where others are at in their spiritual walk and use our gifts among them in ways that they do not understand or that make them feel inferior, is unloving, because it is impatient and unkind. In public worship, as many members of the congregation as possible should be encouraged to take a leading role in a part of the service. Only when each member of a church is exercising his gifts, and doing so in accordance with the principle of love, can that church truly be the Body of Christ in its locality and manifest the unity of the Spirit in diversity (1 Cor. 14:26; 12:12-31).

The criterion for the use of spiritual gifts must always be love for God and neighbour. If properly used, they enrich Christians and further God’s Kingdom on earth; but if God is not truly glorified and others are not truly served, gifts become stumbling-blocks instead of stepping-stones.

Which Way Ahead?

With regard to charismatic issues, Christians fall into three main groups. There are growing numbers of charismatic or Pentecostal Christians in both Pentecostal and more traditional churches; there are those who are totally opposed to everything normally regarded as distinctively charismatic, including some who are convinced that it is impossible to be both charismatic and truly evangelical; and there are the majority, who do not feel strongly one way or the other and who are confused and usually quite ignorant about these matters.

In the face of the phenomenal worldwide growth of the charismatic churches, there is an urgent need for every Christian to come to informed decisions about the basic issues: direct experiences of the Holy Spirit, and the supernatural gifts of the Spirit. This book has presented strong Biblical evidence to support the conclusion that, either at or after conversion to Christ, people today may directly experience the Spirit and receive His supernatural gifts.

Those Christians who are opposed to charismatic claims about experiencing the Spirit and receiving His gifts often have a genuine concern about two matters: the peace and unity of their churches, and the sufficiency of Scripture. The preceding chapter has already dealt with the mistaken view that any use of supernatural gifts, and especially “speech” and “knowledge” gifts, threatens the evangelical doctrine of the sufficiency of the completed Scriptures. Revelation from the Lord today does not add to Scripture, since it reveals nothing new about doctrine or ethics. Charismatics have no more of a problem about the

sufficiency of Scripture than has any Christian who seeks the advice of a doctor, a lawyer, or a banker with regard to medical, legal, or financial matters; or any Christian who prays for the Lord's guidance about what occupation to choose, or whether to marry a particular Christian person, or which church to join, or where to live and work; or any Christian who feels the need for a personal word of encouragement from another Christian. It is totally unrealistic to "put God in a box" and claim that today He cannot speak to us about anything at all except through Scripture.

With regard to the concern about peace and unity, it is often asserted that charismatic beliefs cause disunity in churches by dividing Christians into inferior and superior. Sadly, some charismatics do tend to feel superior to non-charismatic Christians, just as some non-charismatic Christians tend to feel superior to charismatics and label them as "over-emotional" or "peculiar". However, where there have been any problems, the immediate cause seems to be twofold: some charismatics become so excited about what the Lord is doing in their lives that they unwisely try to push their experience on to others; and these others misinterpret this eagerness and suppose (usually wrongly) that the charismatics are claiming to be superior Christians. Disunity over charismatic beliefs is tragic and unnecessary, but Satan always tries to use every opportunity to stir up trouble among Christians.

Tragic in another way is the fact that great numbers of Christians are missing out on many of God's blessings because of theological prejudice. They welcome the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23) but are closed to several of those gifts of the Spirit that are increasingly evident today. This attitude is surely a form of quenching the Spirit, and must be felt by the Lord as an affront. It is equivalent to trying to control Him, saying, "Thus far, and no further." In the face of growing evidence that in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries the world has seen the mightiest outpouring of the Spirit since Pentecost, one wonders how much longer any Christian will be able to continue to deny the present availability either of direct experiences of the Spirit or of supernatural gifts – unless through an exercise of wilful blindness.

Through Christians who are open to all the dimensions of the Holy Spirit, God is saving many people, healing people's minds

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and bodies, setting people free from demonic forces, and empowering them fully with the Holy Spirit for witness and service, including joyful worship and the exercise of supernatural gifts. In certain charismatic groups one may also encounter some undesirable excesses, such as disappointment if people do not fall down under God's power in some ministry situations; or blaming people for lack of faith if they are not healed through prayer; or assuming that all illnesses are caused directly by Satanic forces and can all be healed by deliverance or exorcism; or a belief that unless a person can speak in tongues, he has definitely not been fully empowered (baptized or filled) with the Spirit. Nevertheless, a stark contrast exists between a full-blooded Christian faith and a Christian faith that is restricted by traditionalism and fear of change.

The challenge facing Christians today is to try to keep a Biblical balance while at the same time exercising faith to receive all that God has for us. We must live out Paul's instructions: "Do not put out the Spirit's fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil" (1 Thess. 5:19-22). We do need to avoid excesses; but equally, we need to allow the Spirit to illuminate the Word, instead of unwittingly using the Word to oppose the Spirit. We must be both faithful to the Word and open to the Spirit, for only thus can we move into the full flow of God's purposes today as He prepares His Church Universal for Christ's return. We must discover the vital union of Word and Spirit.

About the Author

Alison J. Sherrington has a Master of Arts Degree in English Literature, a Diploma in Ministry, and a Bachelor of Theology Degree. Her first book, published by the University of Queensland Press in 1970, was in the field of literary criticism. *Word and Spirit*, first published in 1991, has been widely read and well received within the Body of Christ.

After teaching in secondary schools in Australia and Britain and doing editorial work on Bible translations, she held positions in hospital chaplaincy and parish pastoral work. Then followed a long period of caring for her parents at home. She is now devoting most of her time to the founding of Philip House, an inter-denominational women's organization that aims to establish small residential communities of "single" women to proclaim God's word in various ways (www.philiphouse.org).

Alison has been a committed Christian since the age of twelve. Her church background is Presbyterian and Anglican, and she is now worshipping at Intenciti Church (formerly Bayside Christian Family Church), Wynnum West, Brisbane.