

Some Reflections on  
The Closed Canon of Scripture  
And the Work of the Holy Spirit

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**Part One**  
**The Only Infallible Rule**

**I. The Bible**

The Bible is the Word of God. It is free from all errors. It alone is infallibly authoritative, and it contains all that people need to know about God and his will in order to be saved and know what pleases him.

Medical science interprets God's revelation in creation so that God may give direction to people's lives as they listen to their doctors in such areas as proper diet, exercise and rest. But doctors are not infallible, only the Bible is. God speaks to his people through sermons, but sermons are not God's infallible Word. Believers may come to a greater understanding of who God is as they study the writings of a theologian or read the doctrinal standards of the Church. But these writings must be tested. The measuring rod, or canon, by which any word is to be tested is the Bible. The consistently Christian position is that the Bible is inerrant, and that of all the ways in which a person may receive direction from God only the Bible is infallible:

Do you believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as originally given, to be the inerrant Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice?<sup>1</sup>

There was at the time of the apostles a yard-stick by which everything could be tested. This canon, now closed, is called by various names, such as "the faith," "the deposit," "the apostolic tradition" and "the standard of sound words." These phrases all refer to the apostles' teaching, which for the Church today, is found solely in the pages of the Bible:

I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the

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<sup>1</sup> The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, *The Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in America* (Decatur, Georgia, 1984), 21-5-1.

teachings,<sup>2</sup> just as I passed them on to you.<sup>3</sup>

But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form<sup>4</sup> of teaching to which you were entrusted.<sup>5</sup>

What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you--guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us.<sup>6</sup>

## II. The Inferiority of all Other Forms of Revelation to the Bible

Throughout the history of God's dealings with humankind, there has been a Word from the Lord. This Word came in various ways: such as dreams, visions, the casting of the lot, and the spoken, prophetic word. Nowhere was anyone ever to question Scripture, but people were regularly instructed to question everything else that claimed to be a word from the Lord:

Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said.<sup>7</sup>

Do not put out the Spirit's fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good.<sup>8</sup>

Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the

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<sup>2</sup> *paradosis*, or traditions. Cf. Walter Bauer, Frederick W. Danker, William F. Arndt and F. Wilber Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, third edition (Chicago, 2000), p. 763.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:2. Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations are from *The Holy Bible, New International Version* (Grand Rapids, 1978).

<sup>4</sup> *tupos*, i.e., "an archetype serving as a model." Cf. Bauer, *op. cit.*, p. 1020. One should notice the picture which Paul uses in Romans 6:17: Scripture is the pattern, or, to change the metaphor, the yardstick by which truth is to be measured.

<sup>5</sup> Romans 6:17. The Greek word is a verbal form of *paradosis*, tradition.

<sup>6</sup> 2 Timothy 1:13, 14.

<sup>7</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:29.

<sup>8</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:19-21.

world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.<sup>9</sup>

Among these kinds of things are what are referred to as private spirits in the *Westminster Confession*. They are fallible and therefore must always be tested by Scripture:

The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, **and private spirits**, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.<sup>10</sup>

The only yardstick for measuring truth is the Bible. This is so because the Bible is infallible, and it is the only thing which God has left to the Church which is infallible. As such, one may say that it "is the **only** rule"<sup>11</sup> which God has given to the Church by which to test whether something is of God or not.

### III. The Importance of an Absolute Standard of Truth

Though God regularly revealed his will to people by various means, early on in Redemptive history he began the work of recording his will for his people in a permanent, written form.

For the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the Church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world . . . it pleased the Lord to commit . . . that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation . . . wholly unto writing: which maketh the Holy Scripture to be most necessary; those former ways of God's revealing his will unto

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<sup>9</sup> 1 John 4:1-3.

<sup>10</sup> The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, *The Confession of Faith of the Presbyterian Church in America* (Decatur, Georgia, 1984), I, x. (emphasis mine) (hereafter, *Confession*)

<sup>11</sup> The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, *The Shorter Catechism* (Decatur, Georgia, 1984), # 2. (emphasis mine)

His people being now ceased.<sup>12</sup>

The sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments are God's complete revelation of the Christian message. That is to say that any direction from God, now, after the closing of the New Testament canon, will be in the area of application of the principles of Scripture and not an additional doctrinal truth.<sup>13</sup> God has given an infallible standard of truth in finished form, so that there will be no further revelation of the Christian faith until Jesus comes again; no new doctrine is going to be revealed.

Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for **the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.**<sup>14</sup>

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God,<sup>15</sup> and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.<sup>16</sup>

What Paul is saying is that the Church has everything it needs to know in the pages of the Holy Scriptures.

The Westminster Assembly declared:

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from

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<sup>12</sup> *Confession*, I, i. The order of the phrases separated by ellipses has been rearranged to demonstrate more clearly the cessation that it is in view. The statement, "those former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people being now ceased," must be understood in its context: "his will" refers back to "that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary for salvation." As such, it is stating that the canon is closed and that the Bible is sufficient. It is not denying God's use of certain methods of guidance, only that he is not using them to impart further propositions to the Christian faith.

<sup>13</sup> For example, Scripture reveals a missionary mandate; the Holy Spirit may move John Smith to go to Honduras.

<sup>14</sup> Jude 1:3. (emphasis mine)

<sup>15</sup> Literally, it is "God-breathed;" it is the actual, spoken word of God.

<sup>16</sup> 2 Timothy 3:16, 17; *cf.* Deuteronomy 29:29.

Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by **new revelations of the Spirit** or traditions of men.<sup>17</sup>

It is important to notice that the Westminster Assembly did not teach that there would not be new revelations of the Spirit. On the contrary, they certainly believed that men had continued to hand down their traditions. Therefore, they imply that there would be new revelations of the Spirit, as well. What they are affirming here is the doctrine of the closed canon of Scripture and the sufficiency of that completed canon for the needs of the universal Church.

It is wise to speak of this work of the Holy Spirit as a facet of his work of illumination since nothing new is added to the Scriptures or the Christian faith. The Spirit's work of illumination, then, is limited to his enabling the Church to know the meaning of what is in the Bible. But this meaning includes not only the historical and objective understanding of passages of Scripture but the subjective significance of biblical truth on the lives of God's people in diverse cultures and times, as well.<sup>18</sup> Corroborating this understanding of the *Confession* is the affirmation of Samuel Rutherford, one of its principal authors, that the gift of prophecy, including foretelling the future, continues after the closing of the canon of Scripture, but he distinguishes between immediate inspiration, which produced the Bible, and this other guidance which was not infallible:

Of revelations extraordinary of men in our ages not immediately inspired and how they are charactered from Satanicall Revelations

There is a 3 revelation of some particular men, who have foretold things to come even since the ceasing of the Canon of the word, as *Iohn Husse*,

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<sup>17</sup> *Confession*, I, vi. (emphasis mine)

<sup>18</sup> In addition to the sense of being called to go to a particular foreign country, another example of the Spirit's work of illumination is the "inward call to preach the Gospel." (Cf., The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, *The Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in America* (Decatur, Georgia, 1984), 19-2-A.)

*Wickeliefe, Luther* have foretold things to come, and they certainly fell out, and in our nation of *Scotland*, M. *George Wishart* foretold that *Cardinall Beaton* should not come out alive at the Gates of the Castle of *St. Andrewes*, but that he should dye a shamefull death, and he was hanged over the window that he did look out at, when he saw the *man of God* burnt, M. *Knox* prophecied of the hanging of the *Lord of Grange*, M. *Ioh. Davidson* uttered prophecies, knowne to many of the kingdome, diverse Holy and mortified preachers in *England* have done the like . . . .. These worthy reformers tye no man to beleve their prophecies as Scriptures . . . they never gave themselves out as organs immediately inspired by the *Holy Ghost* . . . yea they never denounced Iudgement against those that beleved not their predictions, of these particular events & facts . . . . (sic. throughout)<sup>19</sup>

#### IV. Infallibility and the Binding of the Conscience

Because the Bible is the only revelation from God which he has declared to be infallible, only its teachings can be imposed on other people. Here, says Samuel Rutherford, is the difference between the Reformers and the Enthusiasts: both believed that God was directing them, but the Reformers never presented their prophecies to people as something which was infallible or binding on the consciences of believers. The Enthusiasts, on the other hand, claimed the same kind of immediate inspiration as that of the authors of Scripture and therefore demanded that their prophecies be received on a par with Scripture.<sup>20</sup> The Reformers maintained liberty of conscience in all matters where the Scripture is silent:

God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in any thing, contrary

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<sup>19</sup> Samuel Rutherford, *A Survey of the Spirituall Antichrist Opening the Secrets of Familisme and Antinomianisme in the Antichristian Doctrine of Iohn Saltmarsh, and Will. Del, the Present Preachers of the Army Now in England, and of Robert Town, Tob. Crisp, H. Denne, Eaton, and Others. In Which Is Revealed the Rise and Spring of Antinomians, Familists, Libertines, Swenck-feldians, Enthysiasts, & c. The Minde of Luther a Most Professed Opposer of Antinomians, is cleared, and Diverse Considerable Points of the Law and the Gospel, of the Spirit and Letter, of the Two Covenants, of the Nature of Free Grace, Exercise Under Temptations, Mortification, Justification, Sanctification, are Discovered*, (London, 1648), p. 42

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43

to His word; or beside it, if in matters of faith, or worship.<sup>21</sup>

In this, they were standing on solid biblical ground:

Jesus replied, "And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men."<sup>22</sup>

## **V. Infallibility and the Office of the Apostle**

It is important to understand that infallibility centers in Scripture itself and not in a particular office. One should consider, for example, the office of the apostle. The word apostle refers to a person who has been sent out as a delegate or envoy with a commission from someone else,<sup>23</sup> and so it is the ideal word used for those people who knew the Lord Jesus in the days of his earthly life, were eyewitnesses of his resurrection, and who were commissioned directly by him to establish the Christian Church.<sup>24</sup> But the word is used in a broader sense than this, and sometimes apostle simply denotes a representative sent out under the authority of a local church.<sup>25</sup> In that broader sense the New Testament mentions one Junia, a person with a woman's name, who probably was an apostle of the Church of Rome.<sup>26</sup> In that sense, and in that sense only, there are apostles today; they can be commissioners to church courts, or foreign missionaries, or representatives from a church sent to encourage others in some way.

The point is that the New Testament did not exercise the same carefulness in the use of the word, apostle, as it did with the words used to denote Scripture. Perhaps one

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<sup>21</sup> *Confession*, XX, ii.

<sup>22</sup> Matthew 15:3, 9; *cf.* Colossians 2:18-23.

<sup>23</sup> Bauer, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

<sup>24</sup> Acts 1:21, 22; 1 Corinthians 9:1; 15:7-9; 2 Corinthians 12:12.

<sup>25</sup> 2 Corinthians 8:23 and Philippians 2:25.

<sup>26</sup> Romans 16:7.

reason for this is that the Church always held to the idea that the Scripture is perfect, but that the apostles, even in the restricted, technical sense, remained sinners all their lives and sometimes made mistakes. Peter stands out as an example of this. Paul even had to rebuke him publicly in Antioch<sup>27</sup> because he was not "walking according to the truth of the gospel."<sup>28</sup>

It is also important to center infallible authority in Scripture alone rather than in office because significant sections of the New Testament were not written by apostles. Neither Luke nor Mark are mentioned either as apostles or prophets, and no one knows what office the author of the book of Hebrews held.

The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man, or Church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God.<sup>29</sup>

The apostles obviously wrote many other letters than the handful preserved in the New Testament. Paul wrote at least three letters to Corinth; First and Second Corinthians are probably Second and Fourth Corinthians.<sup>30</sup> He mentions a letter to the Church at Laodicea.<sup>31</sup> Can anyone believe that Peter wrote only two letters in the thirty-five years he served the Church as an apostle? Near the end of over sixty years of apostolic ministry, John wrote his gospel, the book of Revelation, and three letters. Did he suddenly start writing in his nineties, or were these writings the culmination of years of reflection and perhaps scores of letters? One cannot know why God determined that certain letters of Peter and Paul would be lost while preserving others to be regarded

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<sup>27</sup> Galatians 2:11.

<sup>28</sup> Galatians 2:14.

<sup>29</sup> *Confession*, I, iv.

<sup>30</sup> 1 Corinthians 5:9; and probably 2 Corinthians 2:3, 4; 7:8; 10:9-11.

<sup>31</sup> Colossians 4:16.

as the canon of the New Testament. In one letter Paul clearly separates a section of what he is saying from the directive of the Lord,<sup>32</sup> but one should not assume that these lost letters were merely the opinions of godly people.<sup>33</sup> They were the fully inspired, authoritative words of the Lord's holy apostles. Perhaps, unlike the rest of Scripture, they were not of relevance to the whole Church in all ages and places. Had they been, surely the Lord would have had them included among the writings of the New Testament. God himself superintended not only what was written in the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek Scriptures so that it is his very Word, but that he also sovereignly formed the canon of the Old and New Testaments, and "by His singular care and providence" preserved the Scriptures "pure in all ages."<sup>34</sup> How can a person know this? How can one come to have confidence that the book which he holds in his hands and reads every day is the actual Word of God?

Our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.<sup>35</sup>

This persuasion is the work of the Holy Spirit who accomplishes it in God's own people in the same way he effectually calls them to faith in Jesus Christ.<sup>36</sup>

## **VI. Preaching as the Living Word of God**

Scripture places more emphasis on the preaching of the Word than on its private study, because preaching is ordinarily the way in which the Holy Spirit effectually calls

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<sup>32</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:25-40.

<sup>33</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:40.

<sup>34</sup> *Confession*, I, viii.

<sup>35</sup> *Confession*, I, v.

<sup>36</sup> For example, there is both an inward and an outward call in gospel preaching. The inward call is made only to the elect and always accomplishes God's purpose; the outward call (what can be tape recorded) is made to all persons who are present, and it has varying results. (John 5:25; 6:37; Romans 9:16-19; 10:21)

God's elect to Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit nourishes believers through it more than through any other means of grace. Preaching glorifies the power of God:

For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was **preached** to save those who believe.<sup>37</sup>

It is not only the message of the gospel that is important, the medium through which that message is conveyed is also important. This is brought out so clearly in Romans 10:8-17. There one reads of the God-ordained sequence through which people come to receive the gift of salvation. A frail human being is ordained through the laying on of hands.<sup>38</sup> Through this sinful human being, God is pleased to reveal his Word. Without this human instrument, people cannot hear the gospel: "And how shall they hear without a preacher?"<sup>39</sup> Again, one notices the Bible's emphasis is not on the written Word of God but the proclaimed Word of God: "So then faith comes by **hearing**." And that very proclamation is called the Word of God: "And hearing by the word of God."<sup>40</sup>

One occasionally hears of people who put their trust in the Lord Jesus after reading the Scriptures or a gospel tract, but this is not the means God ordinarily uses to bring his people to himself. "And how shall they believe in Him **Whom** they have not heard?"<sup>41</sup> Paul does not speak here of a person's **reading** about Jesus, nor even of a person's hearing **about** Jesus. Rather, Paul instructs his readers to regard the words they hear preached by their own non-apostolic preachers as Jesus' own Word. As the late John Murray wrote:

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<sup>37</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:21. (emphasis mine)

<sup>38</sup> Romans 10:15; *cf.* 1 Timothy 4:14.

<sup>39</sup> Romans 10:14.

<sup>40</sup> Romans 10:17. (emphasis mine)

<sup>41</sup> Romans 10:14. (emphasis mine)

The implication is that **Christ speaks in the gospel proclamation . . . .** The dignity of the messengers . . . is derived from the fact that they are the Lord's spokesmen. In the last clause of verse fourteen the apostle is thinking of the institution which is the ordinary and most effectual means of propagation of the gospel, namely, the official preaching of the Word by those appointed to this task.<sup>42</sup>

Professor Murray is saying that it is Christ Jesus himself who is the real preacher one hears when he hears real preaching. His view is clear in the modern translations of Romans 10:14. The rules of Greek grammar establish this idea unequivocally.

The classical rule for . . . [the Greek word to hear] is: the person whose words are heard stands in the genitive [this is the case in Romans 10:14], the thing (or person) about which one hears in the accusative . . . .<sup>43</sup>

This high view of preaching was not only taught by the Apostle Paul, Peter demanded it as well:

Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit . . . having been born again through the Word of God which lives and abides forever . . . .. Now this is the Word which by the gospel was preached to you.<sup>44</sup>

It is no wonder then that that most careful of students of Scripture, John Calvin, viewed preaching as the Word of God. In his *Homilies on I Samuel*, Calvin says that the pastors of the Christian church are "the very mouth of God."<sup>45</sup> And in *The Geneva Confession* Calvin states:

As we receive the true ministers of the Word of God as messengers and ambassadors of God, it is necessary to listen to them as to him himself, and we hold their ministry to be a commission from God necessary in the

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<sup>42</sup> John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, 1968), Vol. II, pp. 58, 59 (.emphasis mine)

<sup>43</sup> F. Blass, A. Debrunner, and R. Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, (Chicago, 1960), p. 95.

<sup>44</sup> 1 Peter 1:22-25.

<sup>45</sup> John Calvin, *Homilies on I Samuel xlii*, in *Corpus Reformatorum: Johannis Calvini Opera quae supersunt omnia*. XXXIX. 705 in *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia, 1960), IV, i, 4, n. 11.

Church.<sup>46</sup>

Calvin's view of preaching was held to by the Puritan and Presbyterian theologians who met at the Westminster Assembly:

The Spirit of God maketh the reading, but **especially the preaching of the word**, an effectual means of [grace] . . . .<sup>47</sup> It is required of those that hear the word preached, that they attend upon it with diligence, preparation, and prayer; examine what they hear by the scriptures; receive the truth with faith, love, meekness, and readiness of mind, **as the word of God**; meditate, and confer of it; hide it in their hearts, and bring forth the fruit of it in their lives.<sup>48</sup>

Edward Reynolds, probably the most influential member of the Assembly, put it this way:

Therefore, whensoever we come unto the Word read **or preached**, we should come with an expectation to hear Christ himself speaking from Heaven unto us, and bring such affections of submission and obedience as becometh his presence.<sup>49</sup>

This high view of preaching is not only held by Presbyterians, it is the position of Reformed Christians as well:

A preacher is not a person who merely speaks concerning Christ, but one through whom it pleases Christ Himself to speak and to cause His own voice to be heard by His people. The thing that matters in any sermon is whether we hear the voice of Jesus say: "Come unto me and rest;" whether we hear Him say, "Repent and believe;" whether His voice resounds in our deepest soul, "Your sins are forgiven, and I give unto you eternal life." . . . Preaching as to its contents is strictly limited to the Word of Christ in the Bible. The preacher has nothing of his own to deliver, strictly nothing. When he delivers a message of his own, apart from the Word of Christ, he ceases to be a preacher. A preacher, therefore, must proclaim the whole counsel of God unto salvation as

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<sup>46</sup> John Calvin, *The Geneva Confession*, XX, in Arthur C. Cochrane, *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century*, (Philadelphia, 1966), p. 126.

<sup>47</sup> The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, *The Larger Catechism* (Decatur, Georgia, 1984), # 155. (emphasis mine)

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, # 160. (emphasis mine)

<sup>49</sup> Edward Reynolds, "Psalm 110" in Jack Bartlett Rogers, *Scripture in the Westminster Confession, A Problem of Historical Interpretation for American Presbyterianism* (Grand Rapids, 1967), p. 290. (emphasis mine)

contained in Holy Writ.<sup>50</sup>

The French scholar, Pierre Marcel, a person of impeccable credentials as a thoroughly Reformed theologian teaches us to regard preaching as the Word of God:

Here, the word of God is to be understood as the word as it reaches men, not as *scripture* in the specific sense of the term, but as the word *drawn from* scripture, assimilated by the conscience of the Church **under the direction of the Holy Spirit**, and spread abroad to the motleyest of men in the form of preaching, exhortations, addresses, messages, training, instruction, books, pamphlets, and tracts. In each of these cases, the word of God accomplishes a particular work. **Whatever its form, God always stands behind his word.** It is he who causes it to touch men and calls them in this way to conversion and life.<sup>51</sup>

The Bible is the fixed, solid standard, but without the anointing of the Holy Spirit it does not impart life. Those of us who hold to the same high view of the inspiration of the Scriptures as did the Pharisees, must not make their mistake about the source of life and power:

You diligently study the Scriptures because **you think that by them you possess eternal life.** These are the Scriptures that testify about **me**, yet you refuse to come to **me to have life.**<sup>52</sup>

## VII. Preaching and Infallibility

Fundamentally, it is by proclamation that the risen Christ and his gospel are revealed,<sup>53</sup> yet even apostolic preaching was tested by its conformity to the Scripture. It is not for nothing that Luke commends the attitude of the Berean Jews:

These were more noble than those in Thessalonica because they received the word with all readiness of mind, and **searched the Scriptures** daily **to see whether these things** (what the Apostle Paul was preaching) **were**

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<sup>50</sup> Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, 1966), pp. 638, 639.

<sup>51</sup> Pierre Ch. Marcel, *The Relevance of Preaching*, (Grand Rapids, 1963), p. 18. (italicized words: emphasis the author's. boldfaced words: emphasis mine.)

<sup>52</sup> John 5:39, 40. (emphasis mine)

<sup>53</sup> Ephesians 3:7-10.

so.<sup>54</sup>

Even our Lord himself spoke within the banks of the stream of biblical revelation and said, "The Scripture cannot be broken."<sup>55</sup>

One has only to notice how many times the Old Testament is authoritatively quoted in a letter such as Romans, to realize the importance the apostles themselves placed on the infallibility of the Scriptures. Yet as the Faith was being deposited in the Church through the Scriptures, the apostles came to regard one another's writings as Scripture, equally authoritative with the Old Testament.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Acts 17:11. (emphasis mine)

<sup>55</sup> John 10:35.

<sup>56</sup> 2 Peter 3:15, 16.

## Part Two

### Contemporary Time as a Continuation of the New Testament Era

#### I. The Last Days and the Christian Era

Even a cursory examination of the New Testament usage of the phrase, the last days, gives us to understand that this is another way of referring to the era from the first coming until the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>57</sup> This era, which includes both the lifetimes of the apostles as well as our own, is called by this phrase for several reasons. First, the last days are the time following the Old Testament era. One of the clearest references in this regard is Hebrews 1:1, 2:

God, who at various times and in different ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets,<sup>58</sup> has in these last days<sup>59</sup> spoken to us by his Son  
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The Old Testament authors foresaw a time of fulfillment during which the grace, power and presence of God would continually be manifested in his people in an unprecedented way. The Old Testament writers understood that they walked under the grace of God and appreciated the many blessings of the Old Covenant such as full forgiveness of sins, physical healing, material prosperity, and the presence and joy of the Holy Spirit,<sup>60</sup> but they understood that there was much that was beyond their experience. So much greater would be the regular manifestation of the power and presence of the

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<sup>57</sup> Hebrews 1:1, 2; Acts 2:16, 17; 1 Peter 1:20; 2 Timothy 3:1, 6, 8, 12, 13; 2 Peter 3:2, 3, 5; Jude 18, 19; 1 John 2:18 *ff.*

<sup>58</sup> We should understand this as a label for all of the messengers of God's Word in the Old Testament.

<sup>59</sup> Literally, "upon the end of these days." This is a reference to the completion of Old Testament era.

<sup>60</sup> Psalms 103:2-5; 51:11, 12.

Spirit of God among all of God's people, as over against a few, that the Old Testament era could be contrasted with the New almost as if there were no grace, life, power or presence of the Lord there. One has but to read Paul's contrasts in 2 Corinthians 3:3-11 to see how the apostles understood that they lived in the time of wonderful fulfillment.<sup>61</sup> The Apostle John put it succinctly: "For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."<sup>62</sup>

It was the universality of the power of the Spirit which Joel had in mind when he foretold the great outpouring during the last days.<sup>63</sup> The manifestation of the presence of the Spirit would so characterize the life and worship of the New Covenant community that those Jews who refused to trust in Jesus as their Messiah would be provoked to jealousy. Anyone would be able to walk into a gathering of believers who had received the Holy Spirit and note the difference between it and the gatherings of the Jews in their synagogues. Paul saw this jealousy as eventually working to bring the mass of Jews to faith in Jesus as the Messiah before the end of the age.<sup>64</sup> The fact that most people of Jewish descent are still outside the Church underscores how important it is that the Twentieth Century Church manifest the presence of the Holy Spirit in the same way that the First Century Church did. Our's is, no less than theirs, the age of fulfillment.

## **II. The Last Days and the Return of Christ**

Very often the phrase the last days is used in connection with the nearness of the

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<sup>61</sup> One should compare Paul's references to the Old Covenant as "the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone" and "the ministry that condemns men" with his descriptions of the New Covenant as the ministry "written . . . with the Holy Spirit . . . on tablets of human hearts" and "the ministry that brings righteousness." As glorious as the Old Testament was, says Paul, "it has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory (of the New Testament)."

<sup>62</sup> John 1:17.

<sup>63</sup> Joel 2:28-32; Acts 2:1-21.

<sup>64</sup> Romans 11:11-32.

second coming of Christ. But Twentieth Century believers often fail to realize that all of these passages about the Lord's return being at hand were just as relevant to those living during the First Century as they are to us. Our Lord himself told us that he did not know when he would return, that this was known only by the Father.<sup>65</sup> His teaching led even the apostles themselves to believe that Jesus would return before some of them died. In this regard John 21:22, 23 is instructive:

Jesus said to him, "If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you? You follow me."  
Then this saying went out among the brethren that this disciple<sup>66</sup> would not die. Yet Jesus did not say to him<sup>67</sup> that he would not die, but, "If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you?"

While our Lord hints at the possibility that his second coming might be further off than some of his followers thought,<sup>68</sup> and Peter warns us not to be troubled by the delay because "with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day,"<sup>69</sup> the uniform teaching of the New Testament is that the return of Christ could have occurred during the lifetime of the apostles. Indeed, one might almost say that the New Testament implied that the second coming should have occurred then.

### **III. A Post-Apostolic Age**

There is no teaching regarding a post-apostolic era, even in the pastoral epistles. This is not to say that one should believe that the office of apostle continues on until the second coming, but it is to say that such a question is beyond the parameters of

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<sup>65</sup> Matthew 24:36.

<sup>66</sup> The Apostle John, who died at the end of the First Century, is the person in view.

<sup>67</sup> It is obvious that while Jesus did not promise John that he would live to see the Second Coming, he wanted him to think that he would.

<sup>68</sup> Matthew 24:48; 25:5, 14, 19.

<sup>69</sup> 2 Peter 3:8.

eschatological concern for the writers of the New Testament and would have mitigated against the expectation by which they lived. Even though Paul anticipated his own death before the second coming, he never abandoned the hope that Jesus would return during his lifetime.<sup>70</sup> The very concept that there was going to be a definable age between the time of the apostles and the second coming of Christ would have destroyed the sense of urgency which so characterized New Testament life and preaching.

#### **IV. The Christian Life and Apostolic Experience**

Our whole understanding of the nature of Christian life and experience is that it is fundamentally identical to that of the First Century Christians. Joel's prophecy of the out-poured Spirit is for the whole "last days" era. There is no hint in Peter's Pentecost Day sermon that what had now come to be available for everyone who called on the name of the Lord would ever cease to be fully available for all God's people until "the great and notable day of the Lord."<sup>71</sup>

While the present era is an imperfect one, it is none the less the time of fulfillment. Though now we still see through a glass darkly, as over against the face to face experience at the second coming,<sup>72</sup> yet we have received the down-payment of our inheritance, the Holy Spirit.<sup>73</sup> We continually experience a foretaste of the powers of the world to come whenever we truly worship our risen Lord in the power of his Holy Spirit.<sup>74</sup> Even though we do not yet see all things under Jesus' regal feet,<sup>75</sup> yet we still

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<sup>70</sup> 2 Timothy 4:6, 8.

<sup>71</sup> Acts 2:20, 39.

<sup>72</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:12; 1 John 3:2.

<sup>73</sup> Romans 8:16; Ephesians 1:13, 14.

<sup>74</sup> Hebrews 6:4, 5; 12:22-24; 1 Corinthians 14:24, 25; Galatians 3:5.

<sup>75</sup> Hebrews 2:8.

possess authority to tread over all the power of the Enemy: physical and mental illness, demonic strongholds, and everything whereby Satan torments the sons of this age.<sup>76</sup>

The picture of the Church as the Body of Christ, which Paul employs in his argument for the proper use of the gift of tongues,<sup>77</sup> is universal in space and time. He no more meant that the First Century Church was the Body Christ, distinct from us, than that each congregation was a distinct body of Christ. We, too, are the Body of Christ, the same Body of which Paul and the believers at Corinth are a part. We partake, with them, of the same gift and gifts of the Holy Spirit, who has baptized every believer into the Body of Christ and who declares through his holy apostle, "The gifts and the calling of God are without repentance."<sup>78</sup> The gifts of the Holy Spirit will cease when the Body of Christ reaches full maturity, but that will not occur until after the second coming of Christ. Even a casual reading of 1 Corinthians 13:8-13 makes it clear that the gifts of the Holy Spirit such as tongues, prophecy, and words of knowledge will only be done away with when we see the Lord Jesus Christ face to face at his second coming. Paul teaches us that these special gifts will come to an end:

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away.<sup>79</sup>

The time for this to occur is when perfection comes:

For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears.<sup>80</sup>

This perfection does not refer to the completion of the New Testament canon, but to the

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<sup>76</sup> Romans 16:20; Matthew 8:16-17; 12:28-30; Luke 13:16; Hebrews 2:14, 15; James 5:14 *ff.*

<sup>77</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:1-14:40.

<sup>78</sup> Romans 11:29.

<sup>79</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:8.

<sup>80</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:9, 10.

maturation of man in Christ:

When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me.<sup>81</sup>

The maturation in view in verse eleven is not that of the individual,<sup>82</sup> it is the maturation of the whole Church in the consummation at the second coming:

Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.<sup>83</sup>

The thought of verse twelve is parallel to Paul's thought in such passages as Romans 8:16-25 and Ephesians 4:11-16. It is the same as that of the 1 John 3:2:

Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.

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<sup>81</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:11.

<sup>82</sup> Even though there are implications for the individual: for example, the Corinthians demonstrated profound immaturity in how they exalted certain gifts, such as tongues, above others.

<sup>83</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:12.

## Part Three

### The Baptism of the Holy Spirit

#### I. The Day of Pentecost

John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus Christ, proclaimed:

After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.<sup>84</sup>

This great work of the Messiah was accomplished on the day of Pentecost. As he was about to go back to his Father, Jesus had instructed his disciples to wait in Jerusalem. He told them, "For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."<sup>85</sup>

Ten days later the event took place. It was the first day of the feast of Pentecost, the ancient Jewish celebration of the first-fruits of the wheat harvest.<sup>86</sup> It was Sunday; exactly seven weeks ago Jesus had risen from the dead. Out of the stillness came the sound of a violent windstorm. Wondrous signs appeared, and the Holy Spirit came in all his fullness. From that day forward the Church would never be the same again. The timid, powerless followers of Jesus were transformed. The Holy Spirit filled them, and they became bold and powerful witnesses of Jesus Christ. So compelling was the testimony of the Church to the Lord Jesus after Pentecost that the whole course of world civilization was changed.

This earth-shaking event is part of the heritage of all Christians. It is one part of a chain of events which had to occur for salvation to be accomplished. Pentecost is just

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<sup>84</sup> Mark 1:7-8.

<sup>85</sup> Acts 1:5.

<sup>86</sup> Exodus 34:22.

as much a part of the saving activity of Jesus Christ as is his crucifixion and resurrection. The fact is, Pentecost is a fruit of what happened at Calvary and the empty tomb. Had Jesus not been crucified, and had he not been raised from the dead, there could have been no Pentecost.<sup>87</sup>

Following the outpouring of the Holy Spirit with the accompanying signs and wonders, the Apostle Peter rose to explain the meaning of the event. He surveyed a number of passages from the Old Testament, showing how this event was part of a chain of events, each of which was foretold and each of which was involved in the work of the long-awaited Son of David, the Messiah.<sup>88</sup> In so doing, Peter followed the pattern of Jesus' own statements.

Jesus summarized the Old Testament prophecies about himself on several occasions. On the road to Emmaus, he talked with two disciples who could not understand the crucifixion.

He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself."<sup>89</sup>

The glorious reign of Christ could not begin until he had first suffered. The crucifixion was an absolute prerequisite to the kingly rule. Looking more specifically at Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost, one finds him proclaiming:

God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Richard Birch Gaffin, Jr., *Redemption and Resurrection (A Study in Pauline Soteriology)*, (Philadelphia, 1969).

<sup>88</sup> Joel 2:28-32; Psalm 16:8-11; Psalm 132:11; Psalm 110:1.

<sup>89</sup> Luke 24:25-27.

<sup>90</sup> Acts 2:32,33.

Peter speaks of the exalted, reigning Christ as "having received the promise of the Holy Spirit." This promise was not for Jesus himself. The Spirit in all his fullness had been poured out on Jesus at the time of his baptism.<sup>91</sup> The promise here is the promise for believers, the promise that the whole Church might have the gift of the Holy Spirit.

## **II. The Baptism of the Spirit and the Glorification of Jesus**

The baptism of the Holy Spirit is directly tied to the glorification of Jesus Christ.

On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "If a man is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him." By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.<sup>92</sup>

Does John mean that the Holy Spirit was not active in the lives of people prior to the glorification of Christ? No, for even a casual reading of the Old Testament reveals that the Holy Spirit was very active. He, with the Father and the Son, created the universe.<sup>93</sup> He indwelt the prophets<sup>94</sup> and infallibly guided them in the production of the Bible.<sup>95</sup> Over and over again one reads of the Spirit coming upon Old Testament saints and filling and equipping them for special tasks.<sup>96</sup>

Caution is called for in dealing with the differences and similarities between the Old Testament and the New. One must not flatten history and read the Bible as if it did not have two Testaments. Nor must one, on the other hand, so divide those Testaments that he ends up with the false notion that God has used separate plans of salvation in

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<sup>91</sup> Matthew 3:16 and John 3:34.

<sup>92</sup> John 7:37-39.

<sup>93</sup> Genesis 1:2.

<sup>94</sup> 1 Peter 1:11.

<sup>95</sup> 2 Peter 1:20, 21.

<sup>96</sup> Exodus 31:3.

different ages. The saving effects of Calvary, including not only forgiveness but also the work of the Holy Spirit, flow back in time as well as forward. There is but one way of salvation for all peoples in all ages. That way is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone. And that plan of salvation, Paul shows in the book of Romans,<sup>97</sup> is also the plan by which God saved the Jews in the Old Testament. The Jewish sacrifices had no meaning in themselves; they pointed to the work of Jesus Christ on the cross, by which alone sins are forgiven: "because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins."<sup>98</sup>

Having affirmed this, one must recognize that something wonderful and new did take place at Pentecost. Otherwise, he empties John 7:39 of meaning.<sup>99</sup> What must be affirmed is that the Spirit came with greater fullness, glory and power for the people of God on Pentecost than ever before. On Pentecost the Church was permanently endowed with the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of the crucified, resurrected, and ascended Christ.<sup>100</sup>

### **III. The Baptism of the Spirit and Restoration to Life**

In order to understand better the connection between Christ's glorification and the coming of the Spirit, one needs to go back to the dawn of history. Soon after he was created, man forfeited spiritual and physical life by breaking God's covenant in the garden of Eden.<sup>101</sup> So it was that true life could only be restored to man when atonement was made for the offense. Jesus' death paid the penalty in full, not only for Adam's specific sin, but for all the sins of all believers. And this atonement secured the gift of

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<sup>97</sup> Cf. especially Romans 4.

<sup>98</sup> Hebrews 10:4.

<sup>99</sup> "Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified."

<sup>100</sup> 2 Corinthians 3:18; 1 Corinthians 15:45.

<sup>101</sup> Genesis 2:17; Romans 5:12-21.

life, through the Holy Spirit, here and hereafter, for all who are in Christ.<sup>102</sup>

Jesus Christ actively obeyed the law of God for believers and passively obeyed the decree of God in dying as their substitute. As a result of his obedience, Jesus Christ earned the gift of the Holy Spirit and the gifts of the Holy Spirit for the whole Church. Paul makes this very clear in Ephesians 4:4-13, where he expounds on the meaning of Psalm 68:18:

But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says, "When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men."<sup>103</sup>

Those gifts are the work of the Holy Spirit, who equips the Church and provides it with all that it needs to grow up into the fullness of Christ.

The work of the Spirit is the direct result of the work of Christ. "The Holy Spirit," is the one "whom He (God the Father) poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior . . . ."<sup>104</sup> If a person has received Jesus Christ, he has also received the Holy Spirit. "And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ."<sup>105</sup> If a person has come to the Lord Jesus Christ in true faith and repentance, he has been equipped and endowed with the Holy Spirit.

For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority.<sup>106</sup>

Some believers treat the conversion of one who was only a nominal Christian as if it were a second, distinct, radically different work of grace. But if a person is not a committed Christian, is he a Christian at all? Will Jesus be a person's Savior without

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<sup>102</sup> Romans 5:12-21; 8:1-4; 1 Corinthians 15:21-22.

<sup>103</sup> Ephesians 4:7,8.

<sup>104</sup> Titus 3:5,6.

<sup>105</sup> Romans 8:9.

<sup>106</sup> Colossians 2:9, 10.

also being his Lord? That is not to say that Christians never grow cold. A true Christian may grieve the Holy Spirit.<sup>107</sup> He may quench God's Spirit.<sup>108</sup> A believer may fail to walk in the Spirit.<sup>109</sup> And he may fall very far short of being filled with the Spirit.<sup>110</sup> But if one is a complete stranger to the presence and life-changing power of the Holy Spirit, he does not need a second work of grace, he needs to be converted.

Through faith, by the Holy Spirit, a person becomes part of the mystical Body of Christ. Paul in writing to the church at Corinth, a church that had as many spiritual problems as any church in the New Testament, could say:

For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body--whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free--and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.<sup>111</sup>

What Paul is teaching is that if a person is a Christian, he has received the baptism of the Holy Spirit. This is not to say that new and fresh experiences of the Holy Spirit do not occur. They do, but they occur as developments and extensions of what the believer received in the new birth. In that sense, many believers have known a second work of grace and even a third and fourth. One enters the Christian life by faith. By faith he continues to draw on the strength of the Spirit for growth in holiness.

#### **IV. The Baptism of the Spirit and the Kingdom of God**

The work of Christ is absolutely essential to the work of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit could not be poured out on the Church in New Covenant fullness, writing God's law on the hearts of believers, until that covenant was secured by the death of Christ. The Spirit could not come with resurrection power until Christ rose from the dead. And

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<sup>107</sup> Ephesians 4:30.

<sup>108</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:19.

<sup>109</sup> Galatians 5:16, 25.

<sup>110</sup> Ephesians 5:18.

<sup>111</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:13.

the Spirit could not empower the people of God as ambassadors of the King in the line of David until the Son of David sat down on his throne in heaven.

Following his death and resurrection Jesus gave the great commission to his disciples. That commission begins with Jesus' statement that he has now entered into his kingly authority and that the disciples are to go because of that new authority. As his ambassadors they are to bring the nations into submission to Christ's kingly rule.

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age."<sup>112</sup>

But how was the Lord Jesus going to be with his ambassadors? How would his empire be extended? It is through the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on his people on the day of Pentecost.

Pentecost is associated with the establishment of the kingdom in Acts 1. Still not fully comprehending the meaning of the prophecies of the Old Testament, the disciples asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"<sup>113</sup> It is interesting to notice Jesus' response to their question:

It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But 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.<sup>114</sup>

On the day of Pentecost Peter ties in the coming of the Holy Spirit with Jesus' coronation as David's heir. Having dealt with the Jesus' death, Peter quotes from Psalm 16:8-11. He reminds his audience that this prophecy of resurrection could not refer to David, who wrote it, rather:

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<sup>112</sup> Matthew 28:18-20.

<sup>113</sup> Acts 1:6.

<sup>114</sup> Acts 1:7, 8.

But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. Seeing what was ahead, he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to the grave, nor did his body see decay.<sup>115</sup>

Jesus Christ ascended to heaven that he might receive the power necessary to empower his people for the spread of his empire. Psalm 110:1 states: "The Lord says to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.'" Peter quotes this passage in Acts 2:34, 35 and states that it refers to the exaltation and glorification of Jesus Christ as David's true heir. It is as the great King, reigning in the line of David, that Jesus baptizes the Church with the Holy Spirit:

Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear.<sup>116</sup>

This, too, is in fulfillment of Psalm 110, for only in this way could verses 2 and 3 come to pass:

The Lord will extend your mighty scepter from Zion; rule in the midst of your enemies. Your troops will be willing on your day of battle. Arrayed in holy majesty, from the womb of the dawn you will receive the dew of your youth.<sup>117</sup>

There at the Father's right hand Jesus Christ now reigns through his Holy Spirit until he comes again:

The end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power.<sup>118</sup>

The reign of Christ as David's Son will be completed when he comes for his people to raise them from the dead:

For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last

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<sup>115</sup> Acts 2:30, 31.

<sup>116</sup> Acts 2:33.

<sup>117</sup> Psalm 110:2, 3.

<sup>118</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:24.

enemy to be destroyed is death.<sup>119</sup>

Then the Lord Jesus will have finished his work as Redeemer. Then he will have restored all things to beauty and holiness, but until that point he is ruling over the Church through his Spirit. By his Spirit he has baptized every believer into his Body. He converts rebels and turns them into his ambassadors, equipping them with the necessary tools to carry out his kingdom, the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>119</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:25, 26.

**Part Four**  
**The Gift of Tongues**

**I. The Identity of Certain Spiritual Gifts**

It has been demonstrated that the New Testament gives the believer to expect that the gifts of the Holy Spirit continue on after the First Century. The question then arises as to the exact nature of certain of these gifts. It is often difficult to prove that modern phenomena are the same as those mentioned in the Bible. Can anyone prove that what believers have experienced at conversion and call being "born again" is the same as what is spoken of by the Lord in the pages of the New Testament?<sup>120</sup> All Evangelical Christians believe that it is, and a comparison between the fruit of it in a person's life with the fruit of it in the New Testament confirms this. But one cannot, in a scientific sense, prove that they are the same thing.

It is even more difficult to do this with phenomena such as certain of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Many Twentieth Century Christians have suddenly had inexplicable thoughts come into their conscious minds. They had no way of obtaining the information contained in those thoughts, and yet subsequent events demonstrated that what had come to them was true.<sup>121</sup> But can anyone "prove" that this phenomenon is

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<sup>120</sup> John 3:3-8.

<sup>121</sup> Examples of this phenomenon abound: a believer might be in a shopping mall and have the thought, "Share your faith with that person sitting over there. His wife has just left him, and he is thinking of killing himself." Upon responding to the thought, the believer discovers that this was indeed the exact situation and by obedience to this prompting of the Holy Spirit he is able to lead a person to commit his life to the Lord Jesus. It is not unlike "the inward call to preach the Gospel," the subjective sense that God wants a person to do a particular ministry.

what Paul calls a "word of knowledge?"<sup>122</sup>

## II. The Nature of Tongues

What is the Twentieth Century phenomenon of speaking in tongues? Vern Poythress offers the following:

What is the boundary line between "speaking in tongues" and other phenomena? Answering this question is not as easy as one might think. Non-Christian religions, psychotics, and small children sometimes produce phenomena that might or might not be similar to "speaking in tongues." As working definitions, I propose the following:

*Free vocalization* (glossolalia) occurs when (1) a human being produces a connected sequence of speech sounds, (2) he cannot identify the sound-sequence as belonging to any natural language that he already knows how to speak, (3) he cannot identify and give the meaning of words or morphemes (minimal lexical units), (4) in the case of utterances of more than a few syllables, he typically cannot repeat the same sound-sequence on demand, (5) a naive listener might suppose that it was an unknown language.<sup>123</sup>

The identification of the New Testament experience of the gift of tongues with the Twentieth Century phenomenon poses more than one difficulty. This phenomenon is referred to in at least two books of the New Testament, Acts and 1 Corinthians. But there may be a difference in the tongues of Acts 2 and those found elsewhere in the New Testament. On the day of Pentecost at least some of the tongues spoken were in known languages because the unbelieving Jews heard the message of the Lord in their own, native languages.

Utterly amazed, they asked: "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? . . . We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!"<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:8.

<sup>123</sup> Vern S. Poythress, "Linguistic and Sociological Analyses of Modern Tongues-Speaking: Their Contributions and Limitations," *Westminster Theological Journal*, Vol. XLII, 2, (Philadelphia, 1980), p. 369.

<sup>124</sup> Acts 2:7, 8, 11.

This is not so clear in other places:

Anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. Indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit.<sup>125</sup>

There may be a reference to the ecstatic nature of tongues in 1 Corinthians 13:1: "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels . . . ."

There is no doubt about the thing referred to, namely the strange speech of persons in religious ecstasy . . . . The origin of the term is less clear. Two explanations are prominent today. The one . . . holds that *glossa* here means antiquated, foreign, unintelligible, mysterious utterances . . . . The other . . . sees in glossolalia a speaking in marvelous, heavenly languages.<sup>126</sup>

### III. A Phenomenon Broader than Christianity

Ecstatic utterance is not a phenomenon peculiar to the New Testament; it is something that is experienced in religions other than Christianity.<sup>127</sup> Such things not only occur today, but occurred in the days of Paul in the Mystery religions of Greece. Paul is probably referring to this in 1 Corinthians 12:1-3:

Now about spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant. You know that when you were pagans, somehow or other you were influenced and led astray to mute idols. Therefore I tell you that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus be cursed," and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit.'

Behm comments:

Parallels may be found for this phenomenon in various forms and at various periods and places in religious history . . . .

Paul is aware of a similarity between Hellenism and Christianity in respect of these mystical and ecstatic phenomena. The distinguishing feature as he sees it is to be found in the religious content (1 C. 12:2 f.). He can accept speaking with tongues as a work of the Holy Spirit, as a charisma . . . . In view of their pagan background the Corinthians are inclined to view (tongues) as the spiritual gift *par excellence* . . . .

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<sup>125</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:2.

<sup>126</sup> Bauer, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

<sup>127</sup> L. Carlyle May, "A Survey of Glossolalia and Related Phenomena in Non-Christian Religions," in *Speaking in Tongues: A Guide to Research on Glossolalia* (Grand Rapids, 1986), pp. 53-82.

If the judgment of Paul on glossolalia raises the question whether this early Christian phenomenon can be understood merely in the light of the ecstatic mysticism of Hellenism, the accounts of the emergence of glossolalia or related utterances of the Spirit in the first Palestinian community (Ac. 10:46; 8:15 ff.; 2:2 ff.) make it plain that we are concerned with an ecstatic phenomenon which is shared by both Jewish and Gentile Christianity and for which there are analogies in the religious history of the OT and Judaism.<sup>128</sup>

In some cases ecstatic utterances may be caused by something completely natural in the psychological sense; there is so little that we understand about the interaction between the brain and other organs of the human body.<sup>129</sup> Other cases may simply be an imitation of what certain people hear as they are intensely pressured to experience tongues in those religious gatherings where the exercise of this gift is viewed as a *sine qua non* of Christian experience.

#### **IV. The Function of Tongues According to the New Testament**

The exercise of one's spiritual gifts produces growth in grace. So speaking in tongues helps the individual who has that gift to experience growth in Christ. Paul clearly states this in 1 Corinthians 14:4, "He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself . . . ." He found the gift to be a blessing in his own life: "I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you . . . ."<sup>130</sup> And he saw that the benefits of speaking in tongues were of such a nature that he (not the Lord) could say, "I would like every one of you to speak in tongues . . . ."<sup>131</sup>

How does the exercise of tongues cause an individual to grow in Christ? There is no benefit to God's assembled people when someone speaks in tongues without

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<sup>128</sup> Johannes Behm, "Glossa" in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, 1964), Vol. I, p. 724.

<sup>129</sup> John P. Kildahl, "Psychological Observations," in *Speaking in Tongues: A Guide to Research on Glossolalia* (Grand Rapids, 1986), pp. 348-368.

<sup>130</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:18.

<sup>131</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:5.

interpretation, because the clear exposition of sound doctrine is essential for the edification of the Church. But there is benefit to the individual who speaks in tongues, because speaking in tongues can function to enhance the mystical dimension of the Christian life. This mystical dimension can be enhanced in other ways, too.<sup>132</sup>

The mind matters very much in the Bible, but Christian experience is more than an intellectual pursuit. Paul regularly prayed for believers "to grasp . . . the love of Christ . . . that surpasses knowledge."<sup>133</sup> It is true that in uninterpreted tongues the intellectual part of a person is unfruitful, but that does not mean that the person is left unfulfilled: "For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays . . . ."<sup>134</sup> When a person sings or prays in tongues, he speaks to God.<sup>135</sup> This non-rational form of prayer involves a person's speaking "mysteries with his spirit."<sup>136</sup> Therefore, it is a legitimate way of giving thanks and praise to God.<sup>137</sup> But this must be done in private devotion or in an unnoticeable way during public worship.<sup>138</sup> Otherwise confusion would result and the gospel would be discredited.<sup>139</sup>

## **V. An Hypothesis Concerning Some Contemporary Tongues**

How does the concept of tongues as free vocalization fit in with the function of

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<sup>132</sup> This can be the experience of one who plays musical instruments. It is not uncommon to go beyond the playing of notes and experience a sense of the presence of God.

<sup>133</sup> Ephesians 3:18, 19.

<sup>134</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:14.

<sup>135</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:2.

<sup>136</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:2.

<sup>137</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:16, 17.

<sup>138</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:28.

<sup>139</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:23, 33, 40.

New Testament tongues? There are many people who engage in free vocalization deliberately. Some do it for fun when talking with little children; others, such as opera singers, may do it to cover up a forgotten phrase in a song.<sup>140</sup> There are those who have practiced free vocalization and who also have had the experience of speaking in tongues. They would describe the two practices as being very different.<sup>141</sup> One wonders at this point if that difference is not analogous to the difference between reading from the Psalms in a literature class and using the same Psalms as a personal prayer to God. Anyone who knows much about really talking to God in prayer knows there is a profound difference in reading from a prayer and praying it. All truly Christian prayer goes deeper than the human brain; it involves the human spirit. And all truly Christian prayer is supernatural; it involves the ministry of the Holy Spirit interceding through the human spirit to God.

You received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father."  
The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children . .  
. . . We do not know what we ought to pray, but the Spirit himself  
intercedes for us . . . .<sup>142</sup>

If a person is truly praying to God and that person is a Christian, then he is praying from his spirit, and he is being strengthened and guided by the Holy Spirit. It does not matter what language the person uses. For some people to quote a memorized text from another language, such as Hebrew or Latin, can significantly enhance the devotional quality of their private prayers. Sometimes no words are formed, even in the mind, and yet such can be true prayer: "But the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words

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<sup>140</sup> Years ago I performed as a singer. Sometimes what I sang was in German or French, two languages which I have never learned. But I became adept at imitating German and French sounding words and was glad I did on more than one occasion when my memory failed me.

<sup>141</sup> This statement reflects interviews with many people as well as my own experience.

<sup>142</sup> Romans 8:15, 16, 26.

cannot express."<sup>143</sup>

The important thing to remember is that all real prayer is a supernatural work of the Holy Spirit; and yet, at the same time, all real prayer involves the human will, the person's choosing to pray from his heart. No matter how significant the work of the Holy Spirit in the exercise of a spiritual gift, Paul can say, "The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets."<sup>144</sup> A person chooses to pray or not to pray, and a person who has received the gift of tongues chooses to exercise it or not.<sup>145</sup> When a person chooses to exercise the ministry of prayer, the Holy Spirit gives him direction according to the will of God.<sup>146</sup> This direction may come regardless of the language the person uses, even if he is simply engaging in free vocalization. In this way a person may sense that God is speaking to his heart, and he may be able to interpret it to himself or others. Similar experiences are very common. Many Christians have had a sermon interrupted by the conviction of the Holy Spirit. The particular sin revealed may have had no direct connection with what the preacher was saying, but suddenly the believer was confronted with his need of repentance. Someone has said that the mark of anointed preaching is that it results in those who hear it having regular dealings with God. Those dealings with God are not simply the force of logic on the human brain; they are the tugs of the Holy Spirit on the human spirit. No child of God is a stranger to them.

Tongues as free vocalization can fit with the data of 1 Corinthians 12-14, and it can be a form of genuine prayer. But can it fit with what happened on the day of

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<sup>143</sup> Romans 8:26.

<sup>144</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:32.

<sup>145</sup> All of these things fit under the extraordinarily paradoxical statement of Paul in Philippians 2:12, 13: ". . . Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose."

<sup>146</sup> Romans 8:26.

Pentecost when at least some, if not all, of those who spoke in tongues, spoke in the known languages of the unbelievers who heard them? It is possible that it does if one grants that there are varying degrees of the Spirit's control when a person prays. In a moment of great ecstasy, under an extraordinary degree of control by the Holy Spirit, a person could engage in free vocalization and what would come out of his mouth could be in a known human language. The question is the degree of control the Holy Spirit exercises on a person when he engages in prayer or praise.

However one understands contemporary tongues, he must remember that there is no sound, biblical evidence to warrant the belief that the New Testament phenomenon of tongues will not be experienced among Christians in the Twentieth Century Church. And this should make him cautious in his criticisms of the contemporary phenomenon.

## **VI. Tongues and God's Sovereign Gift**

According to the New Testament the ability to speak in tongues is not something someone receives by hard work or praying earnestly enough. What can be said of any gift of the Holy Spirit can be said of tongues. Consider the very use of the word *charisma*, a free gift, for these manifestations of the Holy Spirit. Paul's words to the Galatians are instructive:

Therefore he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you, does he do it by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?<sup>147</sup>

Not only is the ability to speak in tongues God's gift, it is his decision who receives it. While the analogy of the Church as the Body of Christ implies that every believer possesses at least one gift of the Spirit,<sup>148</sup> the Bible does not indicate that there is one special gift which every Christian is to possess. God is the one who decides which gifts are needed in the Church, and he is the one who assigns the gifts to particular

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<sup>147</sup> Galatians 3:5.

<sup>148</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:14 *ff.*

individuals:

And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues.<sup>149</sup>

So it is that different Christians have different gifts. No one gift is elevated above the others to be sought by all believers. That is not the will of the Lord:

Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?<sup>150</sup>

All are not teachers, because it is God's will that only some be teachers. All do not speak in tongues, because it is not God's desire that all believers have this gift.

## VII. Public Worship

In 1 Corinthians 12:31 Paul writes, "But eagerly desire the greater gifts." What are the greater gifts? It is those that build up the rest of the Church and not simply one individual. By that criterion prophecy is superior to the gift of tongues. In this regard one should consider Paul's extended contrasts between prophecy and tongues in 1 Corinthians 14:1-25:

Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, **especially the gift of prophecy** . . . . He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but **he who prophesies edifies the church** . . . . I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but **I would rather have you prophesy. He who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may be edified** . . . . So it is with you. Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to **excel in gifts that build up the church** . . . . But **in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct** others than ten thousand words in a tongue.<sup>151</sup>

Paul's point is that truth is essential to the Church being established. His words

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<sup>149</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:28.

<sup>150</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:29, 30.

<sup>151</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:1, 4, 5, 12, 19. (emphasis mine)

reflect the truth taught by the Lord Jesus: "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth."<sup>152</sup> Paul warned Timothy:

Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.<sup>153</sup>

Christianity is more than sound doctrine, but it is not less than that.

It appears that interpreted tongues function in much same way as prophecy in public worship:

I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. He who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, **unless he interprets**, so that the church may be edified. Now, brothers, if I come to you and speak in tongues, what good will I be to you, **unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction?**<sup>154</sup>

### VIII. Tongues and Israel's Unbelief

There is one function of uninterpreted tongues in public worship: it is an omen of covenantal judgment for Jewish unbelievers. Paul writes:

In the Law it is written: "Through men of strange tongues and through the lips of foreigners I will speak to this people, but even then they will not listen to me," says the Lord. Tongues, then, are a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers; prophecy, however, is for believers, not for unbelievers.<sup>155</sup>

Paul's words are from Isaiah 28:11, 12:

Very well then, with foreign lips and strange tongues God will speak to this people . . . but they would not listen.

Isaiah's words, in turn, are taken from Deuteronomy 28:49, which are part of the extensive curse section of the book. In its context Deuteronomy 28:49 is an omen of

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<sup>152</sup> John 17:17.

<sup>153</sup> 1 Timothy 4:16.

<sup>154</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:5-6. (emphasis mine)

<sup>155</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:21-22.

exile:

Because you did not serve the Lord your God joyfully and gladly in the time of prosperity, therefore in hunger and thirst, in nakedness and dire poverty, you will serve the enemies the Lord sends against you. He will put an iron yoke on your neck until he has destroyed you. The Lord will bring a nation against you from far away, from the ends of the earth, like an eagle swooping down, **a nation whose language you will not understand**, a fierce-looking nation without respect for the old or pity for the young. They will devour the young of your livestock and the crops of your land until you are destroyed. They will leave you no grain, new wine or oil, nor any calves of your herds or lambs of your flocks until you are ruined. They will lay siege to all the cities throughout your land until the high fortified walls in which you trust fall down. They will besiege all the cities throughout the land the Lord your God is giving you . . . . You will be uprooted from the land you are entering in to possess. Then the Lord will scatter you among all nations.<sup>156</sup>

God warned his people before they ever entered the promised land that if they rejected him and his covenant, he would reject them. But he told them that before their expulsion out of the land a series of judgments would come with intensifying severity. The omen that their exile was near would be the sound of foreign languages being spoken around them. These unknown tongues warned the Jews that they were about to be expelled from the land of promise.

Isaiah picked up on the curse from Deuteronomy and warned God's people that because they had rejected the Lord's message in plain Hebrew, they would soon hear the unknown tongues of foreign armies. A short time after this the Jews were given a compelling warning that Isaiah's words should be taken seriously: in the year 701 B. C. Jerusalem was besieged by the armies of Sennacherib, and the Jews received God's warning in the form of the unknown tongue of the Assyrian soldiers.<sup>157</sup> But Judah still did not pay attention to the curse from Deuteronomy, and so Isaiah's prophecy came true in the terrible siege that preceded the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 586 B. C.

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<sup>156</sup> Deuteronomy 28:47-52, 63, 64. (emphasis mine)

<sup>157</sup> Isaiah 36-37.

Paul saw uninterpreted tongues as a curse-omen from Deuteronomy. In A. D. 66 Jerusalem was besieged by the armies of Rome, and the unknown tongues spoken in blessing by the followers of the Messiah became replaced with the unknown tongues spoken in cursing by the followers of the Roman Emperor. In A. D. 70 the city fell and the Jews became a people in exile.

It is interesting to notice that the massive emigrations of Jews to Israel have occurred at the same time that the phenomenon of tongues has apparently been dramatically increased. Extraordinary gifts of the Holy Spirit such as tongues have been experienced by Christians throughout the history of the Church. There have been long periods when these phenomena have not been recorded, but here and there one does come across well documented accounts, such as that of French Presbyterians speaking in tongues during the Seventeenth Century.<sup>158</sup> It has only been in the Twentieth Century, especially in the latter half, that documentation of the gift of tongues has become so widespread. One is left with many questions about any connection between this and Israel's return to the land of promise in unbelief.

## **IX. Tongues Not to Be Forbidden**

"Do not forbid speaking in tongues," said Saint Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:39. Without an explicit statement in the Word of God that speaking in tongues would end with the completion of the New Testament, this verse makes it very difficult to do other than make sure that the practice be done in keeping with the principles outlined in the rest of the chapter fourteen.

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<sup>158</sup> E. Glenn Hinson, "The Significance of Glossolalia in the History of Christianity," in *Speaking in Tongues: A Guide to Research on Glossolalia* (Grand Rapids, 1986), p. 186.

## Conclusion

If the power and presence of the Holy Spirit was to have an increasingly provocative effect on unbelieving Jews prior to the second coming of Christ, one wonders how this could be if certain manifestations of the presence of the Holy Spirit were to be withdrawn. A Jewish person may walk into some churches and find little difference between them and his synagogue, but no one can come into an assembly where people are worshipping Jesus under the anointing of the Holy Spirit and fail to realize that what he is encountering here is far different from the Jewish synagogue. This will not always produce the desire to be part of such a group. Indeed, it did not on the day of Pentecost: "Others mocking said, 'They are full of new wine.'"<sup>159</sup> But it will provoke many people to jealousy.<sup>160</sup>

What the Church in the Twentieth Century needs is to couple the careful, exegetical theology of the Reformed Faith with the exuberant joy of the Charismatic Renewal. We need to learn from other believers and also share with them the precious things the Lord has given us. We need to hold fast to the Reformed truth of *Sola Scriptura* and resist all temptations for the church to make pronouncements where the Scripture is silent. But we need to be open to the applications of biblical truth that the Spirit would bring to our daily lives and realize that he may use many different means to bring that direction.

We need to be open to all that God would do in us, for us, and through us. If ever there were a time that needed to see the sanctifying presence of the Holy Spirit, it is our morally bankrupt age. If ever there were a time that needed to see the historic, Christian message confirmed in signs and wonders, it is our secularistic age.

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<sup>159</sup> Acts 2:13.

<sup>160</sup> Romans 11:11.

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