

## **The Holy Spirit's Leading**

Where do we find our norms and source of truth for our Christian faith and practice? Do individuals receive specific guidance from the Holy Spirit through the gift of prophecy so that they can either subtract from or add to the Scriptures? Do Christians receive new truths? Does the Holy Spirit lead the church into a new understanding of women into ecclesiastical office? When a woman applies for the ministry on the basis that the Spirit has led her, what must we think of it? What is the relationship of our subjective experience to the Word of God?

These questions are not new. Any student of church history will readily discover that most theological questions have been asked by previous generations. The issues that today's experience-oriented and charismatic Christians raise are neither new nor startling. That's why the study of the past is so crucial for the discussion of pertinent issues. And for Reformed Christians the Anabaptist controversy in the days of the Reformation provides excellent insight into our current debates.

### **The Anabaptists and the Reformers**

During the Reformation, the Word of God once again spoke directly to the heart and soul, to be accepted by faith, and illumined by the Holy Spirit. The Bible was no longer a book which needed to be protected and interpreted by the Roman Catholic hierarchy. The Bible became the "property" of all believers. But freedom from the hierarchal structure of the church led at times to anarchy. Radical Anabaptists gave great prominence to the work and gifts of the Holy Spirit. Their cry was, "The Spirit! The Spirit!" They taught the priority of immediate revelation over Scripture. They listened to the inner voice rather than to the Scriptures. The "fanatics," or "spiritualists" as they often were called, condemned the Reformers for their dependence upon the letter of Scripture instead of making the Bible subject to the test of religious experience.

### **Unity Between the Word and Spirit**

John Calvin (1509-1564) was an ardent opponent of the spiritualists. The arguments he used are still relevant. Over and over again he pointed to the unity of the Word and Spirit. He often referred to Isaiah 51:21 where the Lord says, "My Spirit, who is on you, and my words that I have put in your mouth will not depart from your mouth, or from the mouths of our children, or from the mouths of their descendants from this time on and forever" (NIV).

The Bible and the Spirit cannot be separated. No wedge may be driven between the Holy Spirit and the Word. The Spirit does not bypass Scripture. Do we want to know the activity, the ministry, the gifts of the Holy Spirit? Then we must turn to the Bible. No Christian may appeal to an inner voice, the Spirit or to any other subjective experience apart from Scripture. Don't attempt to divide what God has joined together. The master teacher is Scripture and not subjective experience.

The Holy Spirit does not give new, previously unheard-of revelation. Why should the Spirit go beyond Scripture to reveal hitherto "unknown truths"? This is impossible, says Calvin. The Holy Spirit is the author of Scripture.

The Spirit, promised to us, has not the task of inventing new and unheard-of revelations, or of forging a new kind of doctrine, to lead us away from the received doctrine of the gospel, but of sealing our minds with that very doctrine which is commended by the gospel (Institutes I, ix, 2).

God speaks to us not through an inner voice but through His Word alone. We don't need to go elsewhere for truth. Our only source for faith and practice is the Scripture. Says Calvin:

Let us ... fix our ears, eyes, hearts, minds and tongues completely upon God's sacred teaching. For that is the school of that best schoolmaster, the Holy Spirit, in which we so advance that nothing need to be acquired from elsewhere, but that we ought willingly to be ignorant of what is not taught in it" (IV, xvii, 36).

Are differences in biblical insight possible? Of course! Some Christians have deeper insight than others. Individuals can receive special guidance as they seek the will of God for their life. They may be given even extraordinary illumination. But no one has ever received something that is not already contained in Scripture. Prophecy has already ceased. Calvin writes:

For Scripture is the school of the Holy Spirit, in which, as nothing is omitted that is both necessary and useful to know, so nothing is taught but what is expedient to know (Institutes 111, xx, 3).

Calvin was a student of the Word. It had captured his heart. He believed that Scripture must interpret Scripture. Charismatics and those who believe that the Spirit guides the Church into the ordination of women should remember Calvin's principle. Don't put a charismatic, a feminist or any other framework of thought upon the Word. Calvin was one of the finest expositors of the Word in the long history of the Church. Theologians as well as the "ordinary" believers are bound by the Word. Therefore, we must carefully listen to it. Comments Calvin:

Now in order that true religion may shine upon us, we ought to hold that it must take its beginning from heavenly doctrine and that no one can get even the slightest taste of right and sound doctrine unless he be a pupil Scripture (I, vi, 2).

We may not teach or speak anything apart from that Word. He repeated this over and over again.

Let us not take it into our heads either to seek our God anywhere else than in His sacred Word, or to think anything about Him that is not prompted by His Word, or

to speak anything about Him that is not taken from that Word (Institutes I, xiii, 21).

## **Salvation**

How can fallen man, totally depraved, be saved? What must he do? He cannot earn salvation. Apart from God's sovereign grace and the activity of the Holy Spirit, man is hopelessly lost. For Calvin, the Holy Spirit is "the Spirit of grace " For, all who are willing to receive Christ through simple faith. This faith comes from the Spirit. He is the inner teacher by whose efforts the promise of salvation penetrates our minds. Says Calvin:

We have said that perfect salvation is found in the person of Christ. Accordingly, that we may become partakers of it, 'he baptizes us in the Holy Spirit and fire' (Luke 3:16), bringing us into the light of faith in his gospel and so regenerating us that we become new creatures (cf. 1 Cor. 16-17, 6:19, 2 Cor. 6:16, Eph. 2:21)" (Institutes III, 14) and he consecrates us, purged of worldly uncleanness, as temples holy to God.

The Holy Spirit makes us Christ-conscious. He leads men away from themselves, from their subjective experiences, to focus on what God has done in Christ.

## **Salvation and Word Proclamation**

How are people led to a personal encounter with God in Christ? Through a mystical experience? The spiritualists argue that new life is given by the Holy Spirit alone. No means are used. Not so, says Calvin. The Holy Spirit addresses our hearts through the Gospel. He will lead sinners to the believing acceptance of the Word. And when a minister faithfully preaches he will see results. The Holy Spirit works through the preached Word. Preaching will never become outdated or outmoded. An encouraging word for the discouraged preachers! The Word is the "instrument," the "organ" of the Holy Spirit. The preached Word is God's means through which He makes His will known.

## **Assurance of Salvation**

Through the Word, believers receive assurance of salvation. Not our subjective experience, not a "second blessing" but God's promise assures us of our standing with God.

The only true faith is that which the Spirit of God seals in our hearts. Indeed, the modest and teachable reader will be content with this one reason: Isaiah promised all the children of the renewed church that "they would be God's disciples (Isa. 54:12p.)" (I, viii, 5).

Through the Word, God's spiritual food, the elect are strengthened in their faith, and are encouraged in their Christian walk.

## **Testimony of the Holy Spirit**

Calvin did not resort to reason or science to demonstrate the reliability of God's Word. This would have been an overestimation of both reason and science. The Holy Spirit assures us of the trustworthiness of God's Word. He persuades us that the Bible is Holy Spirit authored.

Credibility of doctrine is not established until we are persuaded beyond doubt that God is the Author. Thus, the highest proof of Scripture derives in general from the fact that God in person speaks in it. The prophets and apostles do not boast either of their keenness or of anything that obtains credit for them as they speak, or do they dwell upon rational proofs. Rather, they bring forward God's holy name, so that by it the whole world may be brought into obedience to Him.

## **The Holy Spirit in Every Area of Life**

Calvin did not limit the Gospel to personal salvation, the rescue of sinners like branches out of the fire. Salvation does not only affect man's vertical relationship to God, but also his horizontal relationship to the world. All of life is affected by the presence and the work of the Holy Spirit. He was at work in the creation of the world and he is engaged in the maintaining of it.

## **Calvin and Tongue Speaking**

Like the majority of prominent theologians, from the early church until now, Calvin considered tongue speaking, prophecy and other charismatic phenomena limited to the apostolic church. Not one of the Reformers believed that speaking in tongues belonged to the ordinary gifts, which God had given to the Church. And yet the Reformation is considered one of the greatest Spirit-led movements since the first Pentecost.

The Anabaptists didn't have a monopoly on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. As a matter of fact, their teachings divided and confused many. Not an Anabaptist theologian or leader became known and recognized as the theologian of the Holy Spirit, but John Calvin. Therefore, the Calvin scholar B.B. Warfield could write: "The developed doctrine of the work of the Holy Spirit is an exclusive Reformation doctrine."

Johan D. Tangelder  
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