

## CHAPTER 7.

### THE HOLY SPIRIT: SPECIAL TOPICS

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The power of God now has this city agitated as never before. Pentecost has surely come and with it the Bible evidences are following, many being converted and sanctified and filled with the Holy Ghost, speaking in tongues as they did on the day of Pentecost. The scenes that are daily enacted in the building on Azusa Street and at Missions and churches in other parts of the city are beyond description, and the real revival has only started, as God has been working with His children mostly, getting them through to Pentecost, and laying the foundation for a mighty wave of salvation among the unconverted.

The above quotation is from the first volume of a magazine called *Apostolic Faith*. The article was published in 1906 under this title: “Los Angeles Being Visited by a Revival of Bible Salvation and Pentecost as Recorded in the Book of Acts.” The events described took place in an old church building on 312 Azusa Street. However, what began in Los Angeles, California, certainly did not remain there. The movement, now known as Pentecostalism, has spread rapidly throughout the world.

The Pentecostal movement has been shaped and re-shaped into various different forms. However, certain key elements seem to be characteristic of the movement, and they are described in the quotation above. In the first place, there is an intense sense of excitement: God is working in new and mighty ways! Many Pentecostal churches thrive in this atmosphere. Secondly, people are speaking in tongues. There may also be reports of other miracles; however, the Pentecostal church has usually empha-

sized speaking in tongues as the pre-eminent gift of the Holy Spirit. Finally, there is the clear understanding that the extraordinary events that occurred on Pentecost Day are not as extra-ordinary as one might think. On the contrary, they are the new norm for those who have been baptized by the Holy Spirit. Excitement, speaking in tongues, and extending Pentecost into the present: these three things characterize the Pentecostal movement.

In fact, the Pentecostal movement has been so popular that especially since the 1960s it has spilled over into other churches. Thus, most churches, including Roman Catholic, Anglican, Reformed, and Baptist have a stream within them that exhibits some or all of the characteristics of the Pentecostal church. Often these are called *charismatic churches*. To be precise, then, we should distinguish between the Pentecostal church, which traces its root, in one way or the other, back to the revival on Azusa Street back in 1906 and the charismatic movement, which is found more broadly within other churches. However, people do not always make this distinction, and the two terms are often used interchangeably.

Since charismatic movements are embedded within other churches, it is difficult to determine just how widespread its influence has become. The latest study from the Center for the Study of Global Christianity estimates the total number of Pentecostal and charismatic Christians to be over 600 million. To put this in perspective, there are an estimated 2.3 billion Christians in the world. Therefore, about one-quarter of them claim to adhere to charismatic teachings and experiences.<sup>1</sup> Obviously, it is important for us to take a close look at this movement, which is having such a pervasive influence. To begin with, we will explore the history of this movement. Next, we will evaluate it in the light of Scripture. Then, we will include one more special, and often misunderstood, topic: the sin against the Holy Spirit. Finally, we will conclude by stepping back and regaining a broad overview of the work of the Spirit of Christ.

1. Further statistical information can be found here: [www.gordonconwell.edu/resources/CSGC-Resources.cfm](http://www.gordonconwell.edu/resources/CSGC-Resources.cfm). Accessed: May 4, 2015.

## THE ORIGIN AND GROWTH OF THE PENTECOSTAL MOVEMENT

Although the birth of the Pentecostal Church is usually traced to a church building on Azusa Street in Los Angeles, its history extends back further than that. In fact, already in the early church there was a movement that stressed the work of the Holy Spirit. It was called Montanism, named after its founder and leader, Montanus (ca. A.D. 170). Along with two prophetesses, Maximilla and Priscilla, Montanus claimed to receive new, inspired messages from the Paraclete, which is another name for the Holy Spirit. There are also some reports of Montanus speaking in tongues, although this cannot be confirmed due to a lack of historical sources.

Moving ahead quickly to the time of the Reformation in the sixteenth century, there were some among the Anabaptists who claimed new revelations. Also called radical reformers, Anabaptists such as Hans Hut (ca. 1490–1527) and Melchior Hoffmann (ca. 1500–1543) spoke of dreams and illuminations that they had received from the Holy Spirit, often with apocalyptic content describing the end times. Then there were Anabaptist gatherings in both St. Gall, Switzerland, and Fulda, Germany, from which came reports of miraculous healings, speaking in tongues, and other ecstatic experiences. Just to be clear, such charismatic occurrences did not belong to the mainstream of Anabaptist teaching. However, they were present in certain areas, and they demonstrate that the Pentecostalism of the early twentieth century was not an entirely new event. There were historical precedents for it.

Actually, to understand the emergence of the Pentecostal movement at the beginning of the twentieth century, we need to step back briefly into the nineteenth century, and in particular, into developments within the so-called Holiness Movement of the Methodist Church. The founding brothers of the Methodist Church, John and Charles Wesley, emphasized that Christians must not only receive forgiveness for their sins but also strive to live in a pure and holy manner. Over time, the two blessings—justification and sanctification—were understood to be separated

in time. Initially, upon believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, someone's sins were forgiven and he was justified in the sight of God. Then, later on, that same person might experience the "second blessing," or as Charles Wesley called it, the "second rest." At this point in time, the believer enters the phase of entire sanctification and becomes wholly motivated by perfect love and completely free of sinful intentions. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the Methodist church itself became uncertain about how stridently it should emphasize the necessity of the second blessing. This led some within their ranks to break away and reinforce this teaching. The Church of the Nazarene is a prime example of such a group. The Pentecostal church emerged from within the stream of the Holiness Movement that strongly stressed the second blessing.

Already near the turn of the century, noteworthy events began to take place. In 1895, Benjamin Irwin (b. 1854), a holiness preacher, started a new church called the Fire-Baptized Holiness Church in Lincoln, Nebraska. He taught not only a first blessing (justification) and a second blessing (entire sanctification), but also a third blessing, in which believers were baptized by the Holy Spirit and began to worship in a very enthusiastic way, including speaking in tongues. These teachings were taken up and refined by Charles Parham (1873–1929) who began to disseminate this third blessing theology from his Bible school in Topeka, Kansas starting in 1901. It is important to realize that for Parham speaking in tongues was required as a necessary sign of being baptized by the Holy Spirit. It is also noteworthy that he defined speaking in tongues as the miraculous ability to speak in foreign languages.

When Parham started another Bible school in Houston, Texas, a man named William Seymour (1870–1922) sat under his instruction. In 1906 this same Mr. Seymour, known popularly as "Bro Seymour," felt divinely called to move to Los Angeles. There he began preaching within the local Holiness Movement. Several of the Holiness preachers tried to convince him that baptism by the Holy Spirit was simply and only the second blessing, that is, entire sanctification. However, he insisted, based on Acts 2, that baptism by the Spirit was a third blessing which involved speaking in tongues. Like Parham, Seymour understood this to

mean the miraculous ability to speak in foreign languages. He referred to this blessing as “missionary tongues,” since the ability to speak in foreign languages was given for the express purpose of bringing the gospel to other nations.

From the Azusa Street building where Seymour preached, the Pentecostal movement spread rapidly throughout North America and, beyond that, around the entire world. However, as the movement spread, it also changed. Some missionaries, claiming to have received the ability to speak in foreign languages, went abroad to other countries, only to discover that they could not communicate with the local residents as they had hoped. Therefore, rather quickly the emphasis within Pentecostalism shifted away from the miraculous ability to speak foreign languages, also called *xenoglossolalia*, to the gift of speaking in an ecstatic, heavenly language, simply called *glossolalia*. As time went on, the original emphasis on xenoglossolalia faded away entirely. Especially as the Pentecostal wave spilled over its own banks and washed up as the charismatic movement on the shores of many other churches, all the attention has been on speaking in a heavenly language, proclaiming new prophecies, and performing healing miracles. It is to these gifts of the Holy Spirit that we turn now, evaluating them in the light of Holy Scripture which, we must not forget, is inspired by the very same Holy Spirit.

## SPIRITUAL GIFTS

### **Speaking in Tongues**

Within charismatic circles speaking in tongues is usually described as an ecstatic experience in which the speaker communicates in a transcendent, supra-rational language. In other words, it is as if the speaker’s mind is temporarily put on hold, and instead of using the normal mental processes that lead to forming words with the tongue, this supra-rational language just bubbles up from deep within a person’s spirit. According to charismatics, speaking in tongues takes the person into both a deeper and a higher mode of praising God, praying to God and uttering myster-

ies. Some describe it as speaking in the same way that angels talk to each other and to the Lord.<sup>2</sup>

Now the remarkable thing about this description is that it is so different from what the Holy Spirit himself says about speaking in tongues in Acts 2. When the apostles began to speak in other tongues as enabled by the Holy Spirit (2:4) the result was that each person from a foreign country could understand what they were saying “in his own native language” (2:8). This sudden and miraculous ability to speak other, previously unlearned, languages fit perfectly with the Great Commission that Christ had just given them. Indeed, the mandate to bring the gospel to all nations (Matt 28:19–20) cannot be separated from the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Both in Luke 24:47, 49 and in Acts 1:4–5, 8, these two are inextricably bound up with one another. The ability to speak in foreign languages was necessary in order to fulfill the Great Commission. The fact that they could do so miraculously certainly sped up the rate at which the gospel spread.

Furthermore, after Pentecost there is no indication that other occurrences of tongue-speaking were anything else than the miraculous ability to speak in foreign languages. The same blessing was given in Caesarea (Acts 10:46) and Ephesus (Acts 19:6). Since there is no further explanation in Acts 10 or 19 as to what speaking in tongues involved, it is reasonable to conclude that it is the same as the phenomenon that occurred on Pentecost Day in Jerusalem. Moreover, this fits well with a prophetic line that the Holy Spirit has been developing in the OT. At Babel the LORD created different languages as a means of stemming the prideful, godless ambition of the people of those days (Gen 11:5–7). This linguistic restraint proved to be very effective. Not only did certain groups have difficulty communicating with other groups due to language barriers, but pride in one’s own language and ethnic background prevented any one nation from gaining permanent dominance over all other nations. After all, no one likes to be ruled by a nation that speaks a language that is

2. J. Rodman Williams. *Renewal Theology: Systematic Theology from a Charismatic Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 2:209-36.

unintelligible to them (Deut 28:49; Jer 5:15). In all likelihood, they will resist, and eventually overcome, the militaristic and linguistic invasion.

At the same time, while the existence of many different languages stems the tide of human ambition, it also presents a seemingly insurmountable barrier to the advance of God's kingdom. According to the prophet Daniel, God's kingdom was to include people of all different language groups (7:14). Guided by the Spirit of Christ, the prophet Zechariah proclaimed a very similar message (8:23). Yet how could all these people, speaking all these different languages, ever be effectively gathered into one kingdom and one church? To human eyes, it would seem that Babel erects a series of linguistic walls which stand so high that the Great Commission is doomed to fail even before it begins. However, this is precisely the reason that Christ, along with the Great Commission, also gives the promise of the Holy Spirit who, on Pentecost Day, breaks down the barriers of Babel and equips his apostles to spread the gospel quickly and effectively to many language groups.

In response to this, some charismatics have suggested that whereas Acts 2 describes the miracle of speaking in unlearned foreign languages (xenoglossolalia), 1 Corinthians 12–14 deals with speaking in an ecstatic, heavenly language (glossolalia). They point out that 1 Corinthians 13:1 begins, "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels . . . ." Also 1 Corinthians 14:14 says, "For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful." So, are there two kinds of speaking in tongues in Scripture: one variety in Acts 2 and the other in 1 Corinthians 12–14?

In the first place, it must be mentioned that the key spiritual problem in the church of Corinth was the arrogant immaturity that was leading to divisions in the congregation (1 Cor 1:10–12; 3:1–4, 21; 4:7). The apostle Paul's main appeal to the congregation is to start using all their blessings in self-sacrificial love (1 Cor 13) and for the common good rather than for personal advantage or glory (1 Cor 12:7–30; 14:12). It is within this context that he gives instructions about the proper use of speaking in tongues and prophecy.

Secondly, it is noteworthy that the apostle ranks the gift of prophecy higher than speaking in tongues (1 Cor 14:1–5), precisely because prophecy edifies the entire church. Once again, this is different than the emphasis that has developed within charismatic groups. Within those circles, the pre-eminent gift is speaking in tongues, whereas in Scripture it is prophecy that ranks first.

Thirdly, Paul insists that if any tongue-speaking is to occur within the worship services of Corinth, then it must be interpreted (1 Cor 4:5, 13). As he explains the necessity of interpretation he says, “There are doubtless many different languages in the world, and none is without meaning, but if I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be a foreigner to the speaker and the speaker a foreigner to me” (1 Cor 14:10–11). Clearly, when the apostle is speaking about the importance of interpreting tongues he is thinking about the problems that people have when they go to a foreign country in which they do not understand the language.

In the fourth place, toward the end of 1 Corinthians 14 the apostle tempers the Corinthians’ overzealous desire for tongue-speaking by quoting from Isaiah 28:11, 12. In those verses the prophet speaks of “people of strange lips and with a foreign tongue,” both of which clearly refer to the language of invaders from foreign countries (cf. Isa 33:19). If speaking in tongues were a matter of speaking a heavenly language, then it is hard to understand why the apostle would reach for an OT prophecy, which refers to speaking earthly languages. In sum, there is nothing in 1 Corinthians 12–14 which demands that we think about speaking some kind of ecstatic, heavenly language. In fact, some of the details found in those chapters fit very well within the context of Acts 2 and the Spirit-given ability to speak foreign languages.

However, what then is the speaking in the “tongues of men *and of angels*” in 1 Corinthians 13:1? A closer look at this passage indicates that the apostle is using hyperbole. A hyperbole is a rhetorical device in which the speaker or writer uses exaggeration to make his point abundantly clear. The point that the apostle is driving home is that love is a necessary ingredient in whatever Christians do. Let us see how he devel-



ops this point, starting with verse three: “If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.” Now, no Christian is required to give every penny he owns to the poor (2 Cor 8:13; 9:7), and many Christians may live their life without being burned to death for their faith. “Still,” the apostle explains, “if I would do these extremely generous and courageous things, but did not show love, all that generosity and courage would be worthless.”

Likewise, in verse two, Paul suggests another scenario: let us say that someone has the gift of prophecy, and beyond that, has the incredible gift of understanding *all* mysteries and *all* knowledge. To be sure, in reality there is no one quite like this. Which Christian actually understands *all* mysteries? After all, only a few verses later the apostle says, “We know in part and we prophesy in part” (1 Cor 13:9). However, for the sake of argument, if someone had the ability to understand all mysteries, but he did not have love, all his vast knowledge is all in vain.

Now, let us continue with the same logic and return to verse one. If the Holy Spirit would give someone the ability to speak in many different foreign languages (i.e., “the tongues of men”), or if that same person would even receive the ability to speak a heavenly language (i.e., “the tongues of angels”), but he does not show love, then he is nothing more than a clanging cymbal. In other words, he can make a lot of racket, but it does not edify anyone because the loveless individual is only interested in increasing his own ego, not serving his fellow Christian. Once this context is clear, then it is apparent that in 1 Corinthians 13:1 the apostle Paul is not giving a definition of tongue-speaking as communication in an ecstatic, heavenly language. He is only using “tongues of angels” as a powerful rhetorical device in order to drive home the importance of desiring the greatest gift of all, which is love.

All of this brings us to a crucial question. Should Christians today expect that the Holy Spirit will give them the ability to speak in tongues? In the first place, it is clear from Scripture that we should not expect the Holy Spirit to bring us into such a state of spiritual ecstasy that we start to communicate in some kind of unknown, heavenly language. That is

not what speaking in tongues was on Pentecost Day; that is not what it was in the church at Corinth. Therefore, there is no scriptural ground to seek such an ability today either. We must remember that the Holy Spirit always works in accord with his own inspired Word. He does not contradict in his actions today what he inspired the apostles to write about many years ago.

In addition, although the Holy Spirit is sovereignly free to give anyone at any time the miraculous ability to speak in a foreign language, it is understandable that this special gift was given in the days of the apostles when the Great Commission was first being fulfilled. At that time, the gospel was breaking out into many new linguistic areas. The need for speaking in tongues was great. However, as the gospel crossed linguistic barriers and as more and more missionaries were sent out, there was conversely less and less need for the special gift of tongue-speaking. Moreover, the historical evidence agrees with this. Within the early church tongue-speaking slowly died out. In light of this, it is not surprising that the missionaries from Azusa Street, who thought they had the ability to speak in “missionary tongues,” were sadly disappointed when they actually went overseas. They wanted to experience the same miracle, given by the Holy Spirit in the days after Pentecost, but in reality they discovered that the apostolic era is no longer with us.

## **Prophecy**

A clear distinction between the apostolic era and the rest of church history is also crucial for understanding the next spiritual gift: prophecy. By necessity the apostolic era ended within the first generation after the ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ. All apostles had to be eyewitnesses of the risen Christ (Acts 1:21–22; 1 Cor 9:1; 15:7–8). Therefore, it stands to reason that once those first eye-witnesses died, there could not be any more apostles for no one will see the risen Christ until he returns on the clouds of heaven (Rev 1:7). This apostolic era not only had a limited time span attached to it, but it also had a specific purpose that it had to fulfill. The apostles were part of the foundation which was laid underneath the church of Christ, the Lord Jesus himself being the chief cornerstone (Eph

2:20). It is certainly possible to build on top of that foundation, but it is also certainly impossible to re-lay that foundation (1 Cor 3:11).

Since Pentecost all believers are prophets. On Pentecost Day the apostle Peter made this clear (Acts 2:16–18). It is also confessed in Lord’s Day 12 of the Heidelberg Catechism, which defines this kind of prophetic work as confessing the name of Christ. However, a more narrowly defined gift of prophecy involves being inspired by the Holy Spirit to bring new revelation to God’s people. This kind of prophecy, narrowly defined, was clearly exercised in the apostolic era. In fact, the Holy Spirit makes a very close connection between the two in Ephesians 2:20, which indicates that God’s household is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets.” That these particular prophets bring new revelation is evident a few verses later in Ephesians 3:5 where the same two groups are mentioned. There God’s Word teaches us that the mystery of Christ “was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.” Indeed, we read about such NT prophets in Acts 11:27, 13:1, 15:32, and 21:20.

However, these prophecies, closely connected to the apostles, ended at the close of the apostolic era. Again, in light of the larger context of Scripture, this is not only reasonable, but also expected. The message brought by the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, is the pinnacle of divine revelation (Heb 1:1–4). The ascended Christ had to send out that message, in all its fullness and clarity, through the apostles and prophets, in order to lay the foundation for his NT church. However, once that foundation was laid, there was no need for more, ongoing, new, inspired revelations. Therefore, today, rather than desiring to receive exciting, new revelations, all of God’s people should concentrate on sharing the surpassingly great news of the whole counsel of God’s gospel, “once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3).

### **Miraculous Healings**

God the Father, who is almighty, governs all things, including health and sickness. Lord’s Day 10 of the Catechism aptly summarizes Scripture on

this point. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Heavenly Father sometimes uses his almighty power to heal sick people in ways that leave doctors and patients dumbfounded. However, the same sovereignty of the same Father may also decide not to cure certain sick people, even when those patients are his beloved children. We need to remember that the final goal of God's redemptive plan is not to give people a disease-free journey through this present life, but to bring his children to the new earth where there will be no more diseases at all (Rev 21:4). We are assured that nothing, not even sickness, will separate us from God's love in Christ (Rom 8:38–39), but we never receive the promise that believers will be liberated, here and now, from any and all infirmities.

Within this general context, we can consider the more specific question of whether those who have received the fullness of the Holy Spirit also receive the power to heal sick people by simply uttering a prayer or giving the command. Some charismatic teachers advocate the power of miraculous healings, and they usually do so on the basis of Mark 16:17–18. There Christ says to the eleven disciples, “And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up serpents with their hands; and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.” It is noteworthy that Christ says these signs will “accompany” those who believe. To be precise, he does not say that everyone who believes will be able to do these signs, but simply that where one is found, that is, those who believe, the other will be found as well, that is, these signs.

The truth of Christ's statement is borne out in the books of Acts. The apostles went from place to place, preaching the gospel to which some responded in faith. At the same time, they not only went about preaching but also healing many sick people, and even casting out demons (Acts 5:16; 8:7). Conversion to faith and miraculous signs did accompany each other throughout the book of Acts. Indeed, later on the apostle Paul lists the following marks of a true apostle which include the ability to do “signs and wonders and mighty works” (2 Cor 12:12). Christ gave his apostles these miraculous abilities in order to substantiate the truth of

the message they were preaching. Lest anyone suppose that the message of the apostles was merely a human proclamation, the healing miracles proved, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that these men were sent from God, not from men.

However, it is not correct to take this miraculous ability to heal, given to the apostles during the apostolic era, and apply it to a select group of particularly devout believers today. Many charismatic preachers today will declare that if only someone believes with sufficient fervor, he will be able to heal any sickness on command. The strange irony of this dangerous teaching is that even the apostle Paul, who was surely a firm believer, could not heal himself, even though he pleaded with the Lord to be relieved of some painful physical ailment. The Lord did not heal him, explaining, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9). The same apostle Paul also had to leave one of his co-workers, Trophimus, sick in Miletus (2 Tim 4:20). Furthermore, if the Holy Spirit truly gives believers the power to heal any disease, why does the church have to wait, with eager longing, for the new heavens and earth? Presumably, believers could liberate this life of all disease, pain, crying, and death right here and now! However, the widespread reality of disease and death, also among Christians, demonstrates that the age of a miraculously complete healing is something that we are awaiting in the future not something we are enjoying in the present.

#### SIN AGAINST THE HOLY SPIRIT

Before making some concluding remarks on the work of the Holy Spirit, it may be helpful to deal briefly with the sin against the Holy Spirit, also known as blasphemy against the Holy Spirit or the unpardonable sin. The passage in question is found in Matthew 12:31–32, with parallel passages in Mark 3:28, 29 and Luke 12:10. The passage in Matthew reads as follows:

And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks

against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

Three questions commonly arise from these verses. First, is God not merciful and would this merciful God not be willing to forgive a repentant sinner, no matter how serious his sin? Second, why would speaking against the Holy Spirit appear to be more serious than speaking against Christ, who is the Son of Man? Since both are persons of the Triune God, wouldn't any sin committed against them incur the same level of guilt? Finally, and most urgently, what exactly is this sin and, as each sincere Christian wants to know, have I committed it? All three of these questions can be answered, once we look more carefully at the context of this passage.

In Matthew 12:22 we learn that Jesus has just healed a demon-possessed man who was both blind and mute. After Jesus performed the miracle, he could both see and talk. The crowds were amazed and wondered, correctly, whether he was the Messiah. On the other side of the spiritual spectrum, the Pharisees were incensed. Moreover, this Pharisaic ire erupted into verbal insults of the most depraved sort. They accused Jesus of casting out demons by the power of Beelzebub, that is, Satan. Before their very eyes, Jesus had performed a miracle that was clearly done by the power of God, yes, "by the Spirit of God," as Jesus himself explains (Matt 12:28). Yet rather than giving God the glory, these Jewish leaders gave all the credit to God's archenemy, the devil. Not only that, but they did it in public. To make matters even worse, this was not the first time they did this. Earlier in Matthew 10:25 Jesus explains to his twelve disciples that since he has been called Beelzebub in such a blasphemous manner, they should be surprised if they receive the same kind of vile, verbal treatment.

Thus, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is a particular, specific kind of sin. Too often God's children have vague ideas about this terrible sin. It is not uncommon for pastors to encounter members of the church who worry that they are guilty of the unforgiveable sin because they have committed adultery, taken the LORD'S name in vain, or committed some

other grievous sin. Perhaps you personally have also struggled with this anxiety. To be sure, sins against the third and seventh commandments are serious. However, concerning those sins the following words apply: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). However, the sin against the Holy Spirit is something different. It can be summarized as an ongoing, intentional, vicious, and public ridicule of the gracious work of Christ by attributing that very same work to an evil spirit, Satan, rather than to the Holy Spirit. Such a persistent and pernicious sin is unpardonable.

Thus, the three questions asked above can be answered as follows. First, God is merciful to those who repent, but the one who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit is, by definition, an unrepentant person. Second, sin against one person of the Triune God is as serious as sin against another person of the Holy Trinity. However, as the context indicates, Jesus’ words in Matthew 12:31–32 do not elevate one person of our Triune God above another. Instead, they pinpoint the exact nature of this sin: attributing to the chief evil spirit, Satan, that which rightly belongs to the Holy Spirit. Finally, any Christian who worries that he has committed the unpardonable sin can be assured that he is not guilty of this particular sin. Those who commit the unpardonable sin are intent on ridiculing Christ; they are not concerned—even in the slightest way—about offending him.

#### THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN PROPER PERSPECTIVE

Just before we conclude this chapter on the Holy Spirit, it is good to regain some perspective. We have dealt with some special and complicated topics: speaking in tongues and blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. However, even on Pentecost Day, as miraculous signs of wind and fire were occurring (Acts 2:1–3) and as all the apostles were busy speaking in tongues for the first time in lives (Acts 2:4–12), the apostle Peter kept the spotlight shining on that which was most important: the crucifixion, death, and resurrection of God’s own Son, Jesus Christ (Acts 2:23–24).

In fact, it is more than striking that after his initial explanation of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:16–21), Peter’s Pentecost sermon does not dwell explicitly on the work of the Holy Spirit or speaking in tongues. The rest of the message is all about Jesus Christ (Acts 2:23–36), ending with this powerful conclusion: “Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:36). Above all else, the Holy Spirit works to make us know and accept the crucified Christ (1 Cor 2), to unite us with this Christ (Rom 8:9), and to bring forth of an abundant harvest of the Spirit’s fruit in our lives (Gal 5:22).

Moreover, the Holy Spirit works his grace in all those who sincerely believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. This is what Peter meant on Pentecost Day when he said, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). Here there is no separation between forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit. These blessings are two sides of the same redemptive coin. Indeed, one of the spiritually damaging errors of the Pentecostal and charismatic movements is that, whether intentionally or unintentionally, they often promote different classes or tiers of believers. They speak of first, second, and perhaps even third blessings (e.g., forgiveness, entire sanctification, Spirit baptism), which believers may receive at different stages in their Christian life. Thus, some are left yearning for a promotion to a higher spiritual level and others keep wondering on which level they really are. All of this stands in stark contrast, though, to the words of the Holy Spirit himself who, through the apostle Paul, said so plainly, “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body . . . and all were made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor 12:13). The church of Christ, as described by the Spirit himself, has only one level, and all genuine believers are on it.

*Suggested Readings: Joel 2:28–32; Acts 2:1–12*



## QUESTIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. In your own words describe three main emphases of the Pentecostal and charismatic movements. In your own opinion, what is their most fundamental error? Prove this from Scripture.
2. It is obvious from Acts 2:6–10 that the Holy Spirit miraculously gave the apostles the ability to speak in foreign languages. In the pages above, we have explained 1 Corinthians 14 as referring to foreign languages as well; however, others disagree with this interpretation. Read through 1 Corinthians 14 and note which verses appear to refer to speaking foreign languages and which verses are not so easily explained by that interpretation. What is the best way forward?
3. What exactly is our prophetic task? Lord's Day 12 speaks about confessing Christ's name. Yet how do we work that out in daily living? Try to give three concrete examples of how we should fulfill our anointing as Christian prophets.

## QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. Should Christians today expect to receive revelations from God? The matter often becomes complicated when people have various definitions for the word *revelation*. To some it means an inspired message on par with Scripture. To others it means a specific, personal communication from God that is not on par with Scripture, such as a dream giving guidance during a stressful time of life. To still others it means God's providential working, opening one door and closing another. Discern between these different understandings of revelation and decide which, if any, still occur today.
2. Working with the explanation given above about the sin against the Holy Spirit, can you think of situations where you might well conclude that people are indeed blaspheming against the Spirit? They may be situations that you have experienced personally or may be aware of more generally in society. Do we have a

responsibility to confront such people with their sin? If so, how should we approach it?

3. Please read James 5:13–18. Do elders have a special role to play in praying for the sick (v. 14)? Should they still be anointing sick people with oil? Should we expect that the prayers of righteous on behalf of the sick will bring healing (v. 16)? What are we to think when many Christians do pray for healing, but it does not happen? You may want to consult some reliable commentaries to discover the different ways in which this passage has been interpreted.

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