



DO NOT QUENCH THE SPIRIT! I THESSALONIANS 5:19-22

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"All that we spiritually know of ourselves, all that we know of God, and of Jesus, and His Word, **we owe to the teaching of the Holy Spirit**; and all the real light, sanctification, strength and comfort we are made to possess on our way to glory, **we must ascribe to Him**. . . . Where He is honored, and adoring thoughts of His person, and tender, loving views of His work are cherished, **then** are experienced, in an enlarged degree, His quickening, enlightening, sanctifying and comforting influence" (Octavius Winslow; d. 1878).

I have no recollection where or when I came across this quote from Winslow, but it expresses a truth that I believe the evangelical world desperately needs to hear. Look at it more closely.

Everything we know of God the Father and of Jesus does not come naturally. Rather, we owe everything to the ministry of the Spirit. Everything we understand in God's Word, whatever degree of insight we gain into the measureless truths it embodies, we must attribute to the ministry of the Spirit. Whatever positive moral change we've experienced in life, whatever conformity to Christ we've seen develop in our spiritual walk, the Holy Spirit did it. Whatever strength we receive when our weakness threatens to overwhelm, whatever encouragement we feel at times of despair and doubt, whatever sanctifying influence we sense in our souls, we owe to the third person of the Godhead.

"Where he is honored," says Winslow, "and adoring thoughts of His person, and tender, loving views of His work are cherished," then Christian men and women experience in "an enlarged degree" the glorious benefits of his work.

The **antithesis** of honoring the Spirit is **quenching** him. The antithesis of entertaining adoring thoughts of his person and cherishing his work is quenching him. ***One can hardly conceive of a more serious sin than that of quenching the Spirit of God!***

The Spirit wills to work in our midst. To use Paul's metaphor, the Spirit is like a fire whose flame we must be careful not to quench or extinguish. He wants to intensify the heat of his presence among us, to inflame our hearts and fill us with the warmth of his indwelling power. Don't be part of the contemporary bucket brigade that stands ready to douse his activity with the water of legalism and fear and extra-biblical rules and a flawed theology that without biblical warrant claims that his gifts have ceased and been withdrawn.

There are people who, as soon as they feel the slightest tinge of warmth from the Spirit's supernatural work, quickly grab their theological and denominational fire hose and douse his flame!

I understand their concerns. They have grown weary of fanatical extremes and unbiblical sensationalism and feel compelled to pull in the reins on the Holy Spirit. They struggle with doubt and are increasingly cynical about the supernatural. The result is that they have become practical cessationists who rarely pray for the sick with expectant faith and rarely make room for the operation of spiritual gifts such as prophecy.

By the way, there are, as best I can tell, six specific sins that people can commit against the Holy Spirit. The NT talks about (1) ***insulting*** the Spirit (Heb. 10:29), (2) ***blaspheming*** the Spirit (Matt. 12:31), (3) ***resisting*** the Spirit (Acts 7:51-53), (4) ***grieving*** the Spirit (Eph. 4:29-32), (5) ***lying*** to the Spirit (Acts 5:3), and (6) ***quenching*** the Spirit (here in 1 Thess. 5:19-22). It is with the latter that we are concerned.

Before I say anything about how we *quench the Spirit*, the mere fact that the Spirit *can* be quenched needs to be addressed.

Let me remind you that this is the sovereign Spirit of God, who as God works all things according to his will. Yet here we are told that he has, in a sense, granted to the Christian the power and authority ***either to restrict or release*** what he does in the life of the local church! I hold to a high view of God's sovereignty, too high, some would say. So I do not easily embrace any limitations on what God does.

Yet here we are told that the Spirit comes to us as a fire, either to be fanned into full flame and given the freedom to accomplish his will, or to be doused and extinguished by the water of human fear, control, and flawed theology.

Certainly the Spirit can accomplish all that he wills to accomplish. But it is no less true that in certain instances, especially when it comes to spiritual gifts and the manifestation of the miraculous and supernatural, he will rarely, if ever, force himself upon us against our will or judgment.

For example, when it comes to the spiritual gift of prophecy, Paul says in 1 Cor. 14:32 that “the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets,” the point being that the Holy Spirit does not act upon or through us as if we were puppets. The sovereign Spirit happily subjects himself to our decision concerning when and how we deliver prophetic words.

This is a frightening thought and an awesome responsibility: that we can make choices that will determine whether and to what extent the Spirit will operate freely and powerfully in our midst! This is dangerous ground on which to tread!

Paul doesn’t say, “Hey, don’t worry about your theology of the Spirit. Don’t give a second thought to how you structure and orchestrate your corporate worship services or your small group ministries. The Spirit’s going to do whatever he wants regardless of what you do or say.” That simply cannot account for Paul’s language in 1 Thessalonians 5.

What, then, is our responsibility? We are to fan the flame of the Spirit’s fire! Intensify the heat! Rekindle what has grown cold from neglect and indifference (2 Tim. 1:6). Facilitate! Teach! Encourage! Make it safe for people to step out in faith and expectation! Don’t create an atmosphere of fear in which people are terrified of making a mistake and being publicly denounced for their failures. Don’t forbid speaking in tongues! Don’t despise prophetic utterances! When you discern the Spirit’s presence, when his fire is detected, pour gasoline on it!

Five Ways We Might Quench the Holy Spirit

(1) We quench the Spirit whenever we diminish his personality and speak of him as if he were only an abstract power or a source of divine energy.

Gordon Fee refers to the struggle one of his students had with understanding the personhood of the Spirit: “God the Father makes perfectly good sense to me,” said the student, “and God the Son I can quite understand; but the Holy Spirit is a gray, oblong blur” (5-6).

There are times when the precious Spirit of God is treated as if he were no more than an ethereal energy, the divine equivalent to an electric current: stick your finger of faith into the socket of his “anointing presence” and you’ll experience a spiritual shock of biblical proportions! The mechanical manipulation and virtual de-personalizing of the Spirit has frightened many evangelicals and made them understandably skeptical of any claims to miraculous activity. In view of such patterns of “ministry,” any talk of *experiencing the Spirit* is summarily dismissed as dishonoring to his exalted status as God and a failure to embrace his sovereignty over us rather than ours over him.

This can be easily overcome by a brief consideration of how the New Testament consistently describes the Holy Spirit. Although the noun *pneuma* (“spirit”) is neuter, Jesus often uses masculine pronouns to describe *him*. It is true that he uses the neuter pronouns (*ho* and *auto*) in John 14:17 when describing the Spirit, but the masculine is used in John 14:26; 15:26; 16:8,13,14 (see also Acts 13:2).

The Holy Spirit also has all the *qualities* of a personal being. If you were asked to define *personhood*, what words would you employ? How would you differentiate a person from a mere power or a machine? I suspect you would argue that a person has the capacity for independent thought, self-reflection, experiences genuine affections and can exercise his/her will in the making of decisions. All of these are predicated of the Spirit in Scripture: he has a mind (he thinks, reasons, and knows; see Isaiah 11:2; John 14:26; Romans 8:27; 1 Corinthians 2:10-11); he has feelings or affections or emotions (see Romans 8:26; 15:30; Ephesians 4:30; Acts 15:28; and possibly James 4:5); and he makes choices, decisions, and exercises his will in accordance with his desires (see Acts 16:7; 1 Corinthians 12:11).

The Spirit also performs all the *functions* of a personal being. He talks (Mark 13:11; Acts 1:16; 8:29; 10:19; 11:12; 13:2; 21:11; 1 Timothy 4:1; Hebrews 3:7; Revelation 2:7), testifies (John 15:26; 16:23), can be sinned against (Matthew 12:31), lied to (Acts 5:3), tested/tempted (Acts 5:9), and insulted (Hebrews 10:29). The Spirit enters into relationship with other persons (2 Corinthians 13:14), and can encourage (Acts 9:31), strengthen (Ephesians 3:16), and teach them (Luke 12:12; John 14:26; 1 Corinthians 2:13).

(2) We quench the Spirit whenever we neglect or overlook or worse still deny some feature of his multi-faceted ministry.

A good many folk actually consider it unbiblical to think much of the Spirit. They aren't being blasphemous in this regard, but are simply trying to honor what they believe is the point of what Jesus said in John 16:13-15. In the Upper Room Discourse, not long before his arrest and crucifixion, Jesus said this of the Spirit:

"When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you."

The point they derive from this statement is that the Spirit will never draw attention to himself. His divinely appointed task in the economy of redemption is to shine a light on Jesus. "He will glorify me," said Jesus. Therefore, anything that tends to glorify the Spirit himself is not of God. The Spirit is supremely *Christocentric*. Any ministry today, any teaching, vision, mission, or otherwise that elevates the Spirit above the Son, is decidedly unbiblical.

This is a healthy reminder for many in the Charismatic movement who have severed the person and work of the Spirit from the person and work of the Son. Those who make experiencing the Spirit an end in itself have failed to grasp the goal for which the Spirit has come.

However, we must be careful to avoid the error of *reductionism*, as if the whole of the Spirit's ministry can be reduced to Christology, as if the Spirit does *nothing but* glorify Christ. It's the mistake of arguing that the *primary* purpose of the Spirit's coming is the *sole* purpose of his coming. *The principal aim of the Spirit in what he does is to awaken us to the glory, splendor, and centrality of the work of Christ Jesus. But this does not mean that it is less than the Spirit at work when what he does awakens us also to his own glory and power and abiding presence.*

We should remember that the Holy Spirit inspired hundreds of biblical passages that speak about himself and his work! The Holy Spirit makes himself known through a variety of spiritual and physical manifestations. People often could see the presence of the Spirit (cf. Acts 8 and 10). Consider his descent on Jesus in the form of a dove at his baptism, or his appearance with rushing wind and tongues of fire at Pentecost.

In Acts 13:1,2, it is the Holy Spirit who gives direction in response to fasting and worship. Acts 15:28 suggests that the apostles and elders of the Jerusalem church sought the Spirit in their decisions to find out what 'seemed good to the Holy Spirit.' The Spirit also bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God (Rom. 8:16), and cries, 'Abba, Father' (Gal. 4:6). He provides a guarantee or a down payment of our future fellowship with him in heaven (2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5), and reveals his desires to us so that we can be led by those desires and follow them (Rom. 8:4-16; Gal. 5:16-25). He gives gifts that manifest his presence (1 Cor. 12:7-11). And from time to time he works miraculous signs and wonders and miracles that strongly attest to the presence of God in the preaching of the gospel (Heb 2:4; compare 1 Cor. 2:4; Rom. 15:19).

So, we must be careful that we do not quench the Holy Spirit by ignoring or suppressing any of the many facets of his work.

(3) We quench the Spirit whenever we suppress or legislate against his work of imparting spiritual gifts and ministering to the church through them.

"Sam, are you saying that the doctrine of cessationism is a quenching of the Spirit?" Whereas I don't believe cessationists *consciously* intend to quench the Spirit, yes, cessationism as a theology quenches the Spirit. Most cessationists desire for the Spirit to work in whatever ways they believe are biblically justified. But the unintended, practical effect of cessationism is to quench the Spirit. By means of an unbiblical and misguided theology that restricts, inhibits, and often prohibits what the Spirit can and cannot do in our lives individually and in our churches corporately, the Spirit is quenched.

The church is in a desperate condition. We need all the help we can get! We need the full range of the Spirit's marvelous and miraculous activity. We desperately need the energizing and empowering manifestation of the Spirit as outlined by Paul in 1 Cor. 12:7-10; 12:27-31; Eph. 4:11; and Rom. 12:3-8.

(4) We quench the Spirit whenever we create an inviolable and sanctimonious structure in our corporate gatherings and worship services and in our small groups that does not permit spontaneity or the special leading of the Spirit in how we pray, preach, and praise.

Let me apply this in three practical ways: praying, preaching, and praising.

a) Praying – Let's consider how we often "pray" for revival. Our tendency is to pray for revival, because we think that is the religious thing to do, only later to say, after revival has come: "Oh my! This isn't at all what I had in mind!"

We say we want revival . . . but on *our* terms. Sadly, we pray, "Come Holy Spirit . . . but only if you promise in advance to do things the way we have always done them in our church."

Or we pray, "Come Holy Spirit . . . but only if I have some sort of prior guarantee that when you show up you won't embarrass me."

Or again, we pray, "Come Holy Spirit . . . but only if your work of revival is one that I can still control, one that preserves intact the traditions with which I am comfortable."

"Come Holy Spirit . . . but only if your work of revival is neat and tidy and dignified and understandable and above all else socially acceptable."

"Come Holy Spirit . . . but only if you plan to change others; only if you make them to be like me; only if you convict their hearts so they will live and dress and talk like I do."

"Come Holy Spirit . . . but only if you let us preserve our distinctives and retain our differences from others whom we find offensive."

Or consider how we quench the Spirit in our small group gatherings. It happens when we create an atmosphere of fear and control. People are hesitant and disinclined to speak up or contribute because they are terrified of being judged and put to shame.

(b) Preaching – Here I would appeal to something John Piper said several years ago. He referred to the habit of some who in preaching will endorse and encourage the exercise of spiritual gifts and then unconsciously quench the Spirit with what he called "***the public verbalized institutionalization of caution.***" He had in mind those long, impassioned warnings and caveats and qualifications concerning the work of the Spirit. He had in mind the ten-minute exhortation regarding spiritual gifts followed by the thirty-minute heavy-handed and somber warning about their potential errors and excess.

(c) Praising – Consider Colossians 3:16 where Paul exhorts us to teach and admonish one another "with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs."

"Psalms" most likely refers to those inspired compositions in the OT book of that name. The word "hymns" would be any human composition that focuses on God or Christ.

So why is the third expression of singing designated as "spiritual" (although some contend that this adjective applies to all three)? Could it be Paul's way of differentiating between those songs that are previously composed as over against those that are spontaneously evoked by the Spirit himself? Yes, I think so. In other words, "spiritual songs" are most likely unrehearsed and improvised, perhaps short melodies or choruses extolling the beauty of Christ. They aren't prepared in advance but are prompted by the Spirit and thus are uniquely and especially appropriate to the occasion or the emphasis of the moment. When this prompting by the Spirit is ignored or denied, his work among us is quenched.

(5) We quench the Spirit whenever we despise prophetic utterances.

Observe the parallel between v. 19 and v. 20. Paul's exhortation in v. 19 not to quench the Spirit has to do with our response to prophecy in v. 20. It undoubtedly has application to the exercise of other spiritual gifts in the church, but its first and primary reference is to the gift of prophecy.

Perhaps most important of all is the word "*but*" with which v. 21 opens. Clearly Paul is setting up a contrast. ***Rather than*** quenching the Holy Spirit by despising prophetic utterances, examine everything. The word "everything" or "all things" in v. 21 is a reference to the prophetic utterances in v. 20.

This leads to the conclusion that the “good” in v. 21 to which we are to hold fast, and the “evil” in v. 22 from which we are to abstain or which we are to avoid, are also references to the prophetic utterances mentioned in v. 20. Most have appealed to vv. 21-22 as a general exhortation to help us in our response to good and evil in the world. But when looked at in the light of the overall context, we see that the “good” are those prophetic utterances that truly come from God and encourage, edify, and console, whereas the “evil” refers to what alleges to be revelation from God but in fact is not, having been shown to be inconsistent with Scripture.

The fact that Paul felt compelled to write this is itself remarkably instructive. For one thing, it tells us that not everyone in the early church was completely happy about the gift of prophecy. Some were clearly disenchanted with its use in the church and were actually taking steps to suppress its exercise. This is remarkable for no other reason than that it was happening in the church at Thessalonica, one of the most godly and mature early congregations (see Paul's praise of them in 1:1-10).

Why were some in Thessalonica “despising” (ESV and NASB) or treating “with contempt” (NIV) prophetic words? Probably for the same reason that people (even some of you) do so today!

Undoubtedly the prophetic gift had been abused in Thessalonica, prompting some to call for its elimination altogether: (1) using it to control other people's lives; (2) to increase their sphere of influence and power in the church; (3) perhaps it was being overused and over-emphasized; (4) perhaps “words” weren't being judged at all but were being naively embraced no matter the content; (5) some probably thought it weird and were embarrassed; (6) some who had the gift of prophecy probably claimed they were special, highly favored, uniquely anointed; (7) others were disillusioned when “words” spoken over them didn't come to pass.

In our day, there are several individuals who have so badly abused the gift of prophecy that people have shut down their hearts to this gift and stand opposed to anything remotely resembling it. For example:

Shawn Bolz . . .
Kenneth Copeland . . .
Chris Reed . . .

Don't miss the force of what Paul is saying. Simply put, it doesn't matter how badly people may have abused this gift. **It is a *sin* to despise prophecy.** This is a divine command. Don't treat prophecy with contempt; don't treat it as if it were unimportant; don't trivialize it. In other words, there is a real, live baby in that murky, distasteful bath water. So be careful that when you throw out the latter you don't dispense with the former!

So what is the alternative to not quenching the Holy Spirit when he speaks prophetically through someone? It isn't “anything goes”. Rather, we are to test, judge, or examine, every word. ***Paul doesn't correct abuse by commanding disuse*** (as is the practice of many today). We are neither to gullibly believe every word that is spoken nor cynically reject them altogether as if they have no spiritual benefit. Paul's remedy for sinful despising isn't unqualified openness. His remedy is ***biblically informed discernment***.

The NASB renders it “prophetic utterances” and the ESV has “prophecies”. Literally, this is the plural form of the word “prophecy” and refers not so much to the gift of prophecy but to the individual utterances or words that come forth in the life of a church. Our responsibility is three-fold.

First, we are to test, to examine, to evaluate, to assess, to weigh, to judge these utterances.

As urgent as it is for prophetic ministry to be given a place in the body of Christ today, perhaps even more important *is a church that is theologically literate and sufficiently familiar with the Bible that they can effectively judge and evaluate both the source and meaning of dreams, visions, and subjective impressions.*

Why have some today failed to adequately judge prophetic words? (1) They fear that to do so would be to quench the Spirit! (2) Confrontation is difficult and painful. They don't want to hurt someone's feelings or shut them down. (3) They don't want to lose the blessing that otherwise might come from humble submission to what God is saying. (4) Then there is what I call prophetic awe (virtual reverence for gifted people; “who am I to judge him/her?”). But consider the Bereans' response to Paul in Acts 17:10-11.

How, then, do we judge or weigh or assess or evaluate prophetic words? (1) In light of apostolic teaching as found in Scripture (cf. 2 Thess. 2:15). (2) We judge them in light of their tendency to edify (1 Cor. 14:3): does the word build

up or tear down, encourage or discourage, foster unity or division? (3) The test of love. (4) Community. (5) If it is predictive, does it come to pass (we often can't judge a word until after the fact). (6) Personal experience of having heard from the Spirit (compare Acts 21:4 with Acts 19:21 and Acts 20:22-23). (7) Does the "word" sound like something that the God of Scripture would say?

Second, we are to "hold fast what is good". Once you have determined that the word is *good*, that it is biblical and meets all other criteria and is therefore most probably from God, believe it, obey it, preserve it.

Third, we are to "abstain from every form of evil". The word "abstain" (ESV) or "avoid" (NIV) is also found in 1 Thess. 4:3 ("abstain from sexual immorality") and 1 Tim. 4:3 ("abstaining from foods"). The word translated "form" or "kind" is used only here in Paul's writings. Hence, "shun every kind of prophetic utterance that is evil," that doesn't conform to Scripture, that doesn't build up and encourage and exhort and console.

This leads to several important conclusions.

First, this means that in a manner of speaking prophets can speak both "good" and "evil" words? But remember, *evil* can come in various shades of black! There is "evil" that simply means it isn't good or effective in doing what Scripture says prophecy should do. In this case, "evil" means "ineffective" or "unfruitful" or "misleading,.". Or "evil" may simply mean contrary to Scripture. It doesn't necessarily mean hateful, mean, sinister, wicked, or motivated by a desire to inflict harm on you. It simply means a word that fails to accomplish what true prophetic words are designed by God to accomplish.

Second, this means that we must not assume that every idea or image or word that pops into our heads (or the head of a recognized prophet) is a revelation from God.

Third, it means ***there is a vast difference between prophesying falsely and being a false prophet***. Most have at one time or another, some more, some less, prophesied falsely. We have spoken words we thought were from God which, in fact, were not. But that doesn't make us false prophets. It just makes us human! False prophets in the New Testament were non-Christian enemies of the gospel (cf. Matthew 7:15-23; 24:10-11,24; 2 Pt. 2:1-3; 1 John 4:1-6).

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is crucial to the life of the individual believer and especially to the spiritual health of the corporate body that we make it our aim not to quench the Holy Spirit by treating prophetic utterances with disdain and contempt. May God help us to test them, judge them, weigh them, and embrace what is good, godly, and edifying, at the same time we reject what is bad, misguided, and destructive.