

What These 2 Church Camps Get Wrong About God

Why be a Christian? This question is of utmost importance. Do you have an answer?

Some would say, "You should be a Christian because you will be a happier person." Really? The first person I baptized in London was a Los Angeles Jewish businessman who was converted one Sunday evening at Westminster Chapel. We later became friends, even spent parts of holidays together. He was wonderfully converted, but he said to me one day, "Before I became a Christian, I was a happy man." He wasn't complaining; he was admitting that being a Christian was costly—and sometimes painful. None of his family or his friends became Christians.

Some might answer this question, "You should become a Christian because it could help your marriage." Really? Divorce rates might prove otherwise. I have found that marriages are helped when couples put Jesus Christ first in their lives; they are not only faithful to each other but stop pointing the finger and mutually forgive each other for the other's faults.

The reason a person should be a Christian, says Paul, is because of the wrath of God (Rom. 1:18, 5:9; 1 Thess. 1:10). Most Christians can quote John 3:16 (NIV): "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish [meaning that they will not go to hell] but have eternal life." Once a person is a Christian, he or she becomes a part of the body of Christ—the church. God wants the church to be the salt of the earth. We become salt and light when we uphold the Scriptures and manifest the power of God with equal force. The last thing we want is for these two to be separated, and yet they have been.

Sadly, there has been a divorce between the Word and the Spirit. I believe God hates this type of divorce as much as He hates the divorce of a husband and wife—even more so, if that is possible. It was a silent divorce. It is impossible to know precisely when it took place. It may have happened many times in the course of church history. Sometime before A.D. 65, Paul wrote of a future “rebellion” (2 Thess. 2:3). The King James Version calls it “a falling away.” Between A.D. 90 and 100, Jesus—speaking from the right hand of God in heaven—said the church of Ephesus had “abandoned the love you had at first” (Rev. 2:4b). What was their first love? The gospel. Read the book of Ephesians alongside Acts 19 and 20. The gospel was paramount at Ephesus. So too was the evidence of power.

What is more, when you read the earliest writings of the apostolic fathers (people such as Ignatius and Polycarp from the second and third centuries), the gospel appears to have been replaced by moralism and emphasis on good works. The gospel is the “power of God for salvation” (Rom. 1:16). But Paul said that in the last days there would be people “having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power” (2 Tim. 3:5a, ESV). That is the Word without the Spirit.

It is a gospel sometimes upheld by cerebral teaching that intentionally rejects the gifts of the Spirit. Often it is good, sound doctrine, but it lacks power. Paul calls this quenching the Spirit or putting out the Spirit’s fire (1 Thess. 5:19). An example of this is cessationist teaching. Such teaching—which has utterly no foundation in Scripture—quenches the Spirit before the Spirit is allowed to manifest His power.

When there is a divorce, sometimes the children stay with the mother; sometimes with the father. In the divorce between the Word and the Spirit, you have those on the Word side and those on the Spirit side.

Take for example those on the Word side. Their message is that

we must get back to the Bible, earnestly contend for the faith once delivered to the saints (Jude 3), get back to Reformation doctrine (justification by faith as taught by Martin Luther), rediscover assurance of salvation as taught by John Calvin and return to the teaching of the sovereignty of God as preached by Jonathan Edwards.

What is wrong with this emphasis? Nothing, in my opinion. It is exactly right.

Take those on the Spirit side. Their message is that we must get back to the book of Acts where there were signs, wonders and miracles—gifts of the Spirit in operation. When they had a prayer meeting, the place was “shaken” (Acts 4:31). Get into Peter’s “shadow” and you were healed (Acts 5:15). Lie to the Holy Spirit and you were struck dead on the spot (Acts 5:1-10).

What is wrong with this emphasis? Nothing, in my opinion. It is exactly right.

The problem is that neither will learn from the other; they talk past each other and don’t take the other point of view seriously.

In my experience Word people resent it if someone says they are ignorant of the Holy Spirit. They are indignant. “Whatever do you mean? We believe in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit!” I don’t mean to be unfair, but I have sometimes wondered if their true conviction is “God the Father, God the Son and God the holy Bible,” as Jack Taylor often puts it.

Likewise, Spirit people feel insulted if someone says they are ignorant of the Word—or at least good theology. “We believe in the Bible! That is all we preach!” they will say with fervor. To suggest they don’t have much interest in sound theology puts their backs up. They don’t get it.

This is why we have the two camps today. Like a divorced

couple, neither really listens to each other since each group is totally convinced they don't have a problem. Hence the problem continues. The church is asleep. The world is going to hell, and we don't seem to care all that much. We all want to stay in our comfort zones.

Problems on Both Sides

I must now discuss sad developments in both the Word and Spirit camps from the last couple decades, although both maladies have been in existence for longer than that.

On the charismatic side, I must address the rise of prosperity teaching and faith healers. The common denominator that held most charismatics and Pentecostals together in early years was an emphasis on signs, wonders, miracles and the gifts of the Spirit—mostly healing. However, that is not true in some charismatic or Pentecostal ministries today, where the emphasis has shifted to prosperity teaching.

Here is partly how it happened. There was an undoubted anointing of healing and miracles in the 1950s. People were truly healed—of cancer, polio (before the Salk vaccine became widely used) and immobility. People in large numbers got out of wheelchairs and either carried their wheelchairs home or threw them away. In the meantime, some of the high-profile people who emphasized healing—and who saw people healed—began television broadcasts. The money flowed. But for some reason, healings started to wane. With fewer genuine miracles, one needed another reason to keep people watching and keep the money flowing.

Around this time, the emphasis switched from healing miracles to financial miracles. Nowadays a TV personality seldom finishes a show without mentioning finances and giving the implication that God does not want you to be poor. I am not saying there is no biblical basis for some of this teaching. I have written a book called *Tithing*, and in it I stress that

“you cannot outgive the Lord.” However, I fear some have gone too far in their emphasis.

My friend Rev. Kenny Borthwick, a Church of Scotland minister and unashamed charismatic, told me he often watches religious television through the eyes of unsaved people. After watching for hours, he turned to his wife and said, “If I did not know otherwise, I would say that Christianity is all about money.”

What is more, I fear that many prosperity teachers have, sadly, given sincere and sound charismatics a bad name. I know many charismatics, and I do not wish to paint with too broad a brush and say that all charismatics are focused on prosperity. Still, there is no denying that we only find this unhealthy emphasis among charismatic ministries.

Sadly, some who prayed for the sick became known for three other problematic things. First, they kept people in wheelchairs away from the front of the auditorium, where they would have more hope of receiving prayer. One famous faith healer refused to pray for people in wheelchairs.

Second, they began blaming people who needed healing for their lack of faith if they were not healed, giving people with sickness or disability a guilt trip. This sort of thing did not characterize the era of healing anointing that was around decades ago.

Third, a spirit of arrogance seems to have emerged in some when it comes to one’s own faith. For example, one famous preacher said, “If the apostle Paul had my faith, he would not have had his thorn in the flesh.” This kind of teaching is wrong, and many sincere people who don’t know solid theology are carried along by it.

On the evangelical side, however, I must also address the Word camp’s avoidance of both the Spirit and serious issues. I will not enter much further into the cessationist issue, as I have dealt with that elsewhere. But it is my observation that

evangelical ministers generally who are not cessationists might as well be. They keep a safe distance away from anyone who might cause a stir. They fear losing members or getting involved with anything that might hurt their finances. They remain in their comfort zones. They often seem terrified at any current activity of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, I will repeat what I have said many times—that if it were not for the gift of speaking in tongues, there would probably be no objection to the gifts of the Spirit. True revival never comes in a neat and tidy package.

I also must mention the lack of preaching on eternal punishment in most pulpits today. I'm afraid this would include a growing number of charismatic churches too. Those who have chosen to believe in annihilationism—the view that people come to nothing as being the meaning of eternal punishment—have increased dramatically. Also, many of those who reject annihilationism seldom emphasize that the lost will go into conscious eternal punishment after they die.

Furthermore, most people today have never heard of the word “propitiation”—the heart of the gospel. It means that Jesus' shed blood turned God's wrath away. The justice of God was satisfied by the death of His Son. For people to be saved, they need only to transfer their trust from good works to Christ's shed blood.

To summarize: As the church in Ephesus had left their first love, the gospel, so too do many who believe the gospel in their heads but do not preach it with passion. Soul winning is never popular.

The Coming Awakening

In John 14:26 Jesus said the Holy Spirit would bring to our remembrance what we had been taught. When you read that verse, don't forget that Jesus' disciples had been trained. They were taught by Jesus Himself; they'd heard a lot and learned a lot.

Would they forget what they had learned? “Don’t worry about that,” Jesus said. “The Holy Spirit will bring to your minds what you learned.”

I hear people talk about the desire to be Spirit-filled, and I applaud that desire. However, I have to tell you that if you are empty-headed before you are Spirit-filled, you will be empty-headed after you are Spirit-filled. The Spirit cannot remind you of something you never knew in the first place.

I believe that revival is coming—an unprecedented outpouring unlike anything our generation has seen. The question is, are we ready for it? Have we been trained? Have we been taught? The people God will use most are those who have sought His face (getting to know Him and desiring more of Him) rather than His hand (what they can get from Him). He is looking for a people who have searched His Word and stood in awe of it.

Job could say, “I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my daily bread” (Job 23:12b, NIV). The psalmist could say, “I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you” (Ps. 119:11). How many of us memorize Scripture—an art that has virtually perished from the earth? You ask, “What’s the use? Why read the Bible? Why memorize Scripture? Why endure teaching? It is so boring; it is so uninspiring.”

I answer, “One day it will pay off; the Spirit will bring to your mind what you’ve learned.”

Make no mistake: the gospel of Jesus Christ is complete without signs and wonders. However, the Bible is not complete without signs and wonders.

If we want power, it’s going to have to come from the Spirit. If we are going to get on good terms with the Spirit, then we have to get on good terms with His book—His greatest product. We honor Him when we show that we love His Word—so much so that we want to know the Bible backward and forward.

Do you say that you love the Holy Spirit? He's asking you today, "Do you really?" A release of the Spirit will result in a personal renewal of power that will restore the honor of God's name.

Forgive me if I'm wrong, but I suspect that when it comes to the theme Word and Spirit, evangelicals seem to be more interested in the Word than they are the Holy Spirit. Charismatics seem to be more interested in the Holy Spirit than they are the Word. It is my view that we must love both equally, pursue both equally, and emphasize both equally.

I fear that some have so little confidence in the authority of the Word that it has hardly crossed their minds how the Word of God can astonish. Jesus could astonish people with the Word as easily as He could with signs and wonders. You might say, "Well, if only I could have Jesus teaching me personally all the time, I too would be astonished."

I answer: You have the greatest expositor with you. He is in you: the Holy Spirit. We will release the Spirit to the degree that we stand in awe of His Word, stop quenching the Spirit by unbelief and stop grieving the Spirit by bitterness and unforgiveness.

The scope for power, therefore, will be found to the degree that we value His own Word. Signs following will be His seal on us. Power that flows from His name will be in proportion to our love for His Word. When we express that love, don't be surprised to see healings, miracles, signs and wonders take place even during the preaching of the gospel. There may be no need for people to get into prayer lines. It can happen right where the people are.

My father named me after his favorite preacher, Dr. R. T. Williams (1883–1946), who used to say to young preachers: "Honor the blood and honor the Holy Ghost." By that he meant that the gospel should emphasize Jesus' blood and that the

Holy Spirit should be in control of the services we lead. We must never upstage the gospel, but we must be open to the Spirit.

I, therefore, fear that a silent divorce has taken place between the Word and the Spirit, between the Word and the name, between the Scriptures and the power of God.

In our day there are those whose sole emphasis is the Word. Others say, "I want to see power." There are those who come to our services expecting to hear the Word. At Westminster Chapel, I used to hear, "Thank you for your word." That is what they came for; that was what they got. Others want to see a demonstration of power. They want to see things happen.

When these two—the Word and the power of the Spirit—are brought back together, a remarriage will occur. The simultaneous combination will create a spontaneous combustion. The day will come when those who come to see will hear, and those who come to hear will see.

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