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The Dilemma We Face When Pentecostals Quench the Spirit

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Pentecostalism, spiritual gifts, miracles, and evangelism have always been linked together. Omit one and Pentecostalism is redefined. Even so, Pentecostals have disagreed through the years over how the power of the Spirit may be experienced.

When Charles F. Parham visited the Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles, he denounced the fleshly manifestations he observed, saying, "We have no sympathy with nor do we countenance the gymnastic contortions of the Holy Rollers who throw fits, perform somersaults, roll and kick in the straw or dust or upon the floor of the meetinghouse... When any of that class come to our meeting and begin throwing fits, we quietly have the attendants take them out." Although unduly harsh and racist in his judgment, Parham didn't consider the emotionalism in his own meetings to be excessive.

Though longing for an old-fashioned Pentecostal revival, many of the faithful today would probably feel ill at ease with the boisterous and emotional worship that characterized early Pentecostal meetings. In one case, when believers went from Azusa Street to nearby Pasadena to hold services, neighbors complained to the police about the loud worship that continued late into the night. Maria B. Woodworth-Etter, the famed holiness and healing evangelist who joined the Pentecostal movement in 1907, had already become well known as the "trance evangelist" because of the many people who fell to the floor "under the power" in her meetings. Anglo-Pentecostal church services are quieter and more predictable today.

In camp meetings and revival campaigns Pentecostals shouted praises to God, clapped their hands, and played tambourines and other instruments while singing gospel songs. Dancing and laughing in the Spirit, shaking under the power of God, singing in tongues, and walking around their tents and wooden tabernacles in Jericho marches were also common expressions of worship. Messages in tongues and interpretations as well as prophetic utterances often reminded them of the imminent coming of Christ. Leaders encouraged seekers to "hold steady" while waiting for the moving of the Spirit and then "take their liberty" in following His directives.

At times emotional demonstrations and spiritual claims became counterproductive when believers brought more attention to themselves than to Christ. Many Pentecostals recognized the need to balance the dynamics of Spirit-filled living with careful instruction: Spiritual manifestations would only be beneficial in

a context ordered by the Word of God.

In part, this concern prompted the call for Pentecostal saints to gather at Hot Springs, Arkansas, in 1914, to form a fellowship of congregations to "recognize scriptural methods and order for worship, unity, fellowship, work and business for God, and to disapprove of all unscriptural methods, doctrine, and conduct...endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace until we all come into the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, and to walk accordingly..."

Even with the development of The General Council of the Assemblies of God, a long-standing tension between freedom and order has remained, prompting ministers to question the validity of spiritual claims lacking biblical warrant.

In a curious notice published in the *Pentecostal Evangel* in 1919, the editors announced that Warren F. Carothers, a leading minister in the Council, had received the "gift of weather forecasting" and offered readers a weekly weather column. It never appeared; extravagant claims were gradually ignored.

The worldwide blessing that the recent charismatic movement has brought to spiritual renewal, evangelism, and missions has intensified the debate over appropriate responses to the Spirit. In some cases unusual manifestations, though characteristic of earlier Pentecostal spirituality, have been discouraged by contemporary Pentecostals at the risk of quenching the Spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:19). How shall we resolve this dilemma that strikes at the very heart of our belief in the ministry of the Spirit and our own identity? While many suggestions could be made, the following are indispensable to safeguarding Pentecostal blessing in our congregations.

First, Scripture must remain the basis for the Spirit-filled life, the framework from which the discernment and testing of spiritual phenomena should be made (1 Corinthians 12:10; 2 Timothy 3:16,17; 1 John 4:1-6). Jesus made it clear that when the Paraclete came, He would convict the world of sin, lead believers into all truth, and thereby glorify Him (John 16:5-15). Thus when spiritual manifestations in times of corporate worship draw more attention to individuals than to Christ, they should be corrected with gentle and loving admonition to help believers grow beyond carnality to spiritual maturity.

Love must reign over desires for spiritual power; as the source of empowered ministry, love always glorifies Christ and builds up the Church (1 Corinthians 13; Ephesians 4:11-16). Noel Perkin, an earlier missions leader of the Assemblies of God, once described "those who are closely associated with God" as having a "beauty

about their countenance which nothing else can supply." When congregations of believers reflect the fruit of the Spirit, grow in the knowledge of God, and mutually submit to one another in love (Ephesians 5:17-21), their responses to the Spirit's power will be "fitting and orderly" (1 Corinthians 14:40).

Secondly, people react differently to the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, depending on their emotional makeup, past experiences, needs at the moment, and social standing. In other words, the human element is never absent. However, should the reputation of a church center more on emotionalism and sensationalism than on the redemptive power of the gospel in word and deed, then disorder has prevailed and the message of Christ is compromised.

Unity in the Spirit is enhanced by the rich diversity within the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-16) and necessitates teaching, patience, and tolerance. For instance, while some have criticized believers who have engaged in holy laughter, the nature of this blessing might actually bring healing for joyless victims of malignant stresses in our modern culture. Is it heretical? Not unless it obscures the good news of Jesus Christ, distracts from the worship of God, or becomes a new shibboleth of spiritual maturity. Joy testifies to the redemptive and healing work of Christ.

Finally, beware when some insist that all must be loud or quiet, fast-moving or slow-moving, old-fashioned or contemporary, hymns or choruses; that all must sing in tongues, laugh, dance, shake, or clap their hands. Legalism invariably short-circuits freedom in worship. External features of Pentecostal spirituality fade in importance when compared to knowing Christ.

Like other revival movements in their later stages, Pentecostalism has dug deep trench lines to protect cherished traditions. Unwittingly, constant attention to preservation may sidetrack believers from seeing and being a part of what the Spirit is doing in the world today. Paul's directive to the Thessalonian Christians still speaks to Pentecostals today: "Do not put out the Spirit's fire" (1 Thessalonians 5:19, NIV).

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