

# MIND AND SPIRIT

By Steve Zeisler

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Rather than preaching a sermon this morning, I propose to engage in what could be called a "view from the pastor's desk." There are two reasons for this. First, I am doing so because we have reached the fourteenth chapter in our study of Paul's First Corinthian letter, a section which speaks of a tension that existed among the Corinthian Christians. This tension has existed in the church in every generation since the first century, and thus it has application to us today. It occurred to me that it might be to our advantage to talk about this issue, following the format of a "fireside chat," as it were, a view from my desk, before we actually get into an exposition of the passage proper.

## RATIONAL AND TRANSRATIONAL

Simply stated, this tension is between an approach to God that is essentially rational, one in which we expect God to instruct our minds and we respond in obedience to what he tells us to do, and an approach which some have termed a "trans-rational" in which God's actions bypass our minds and we encounter him in unexpected and dramatic ways (for example, in 14:14 we read, "If I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful.") These two different approaches to God do not need to come into conflict but, unfortunately, they often seem to do so. The result is that Christians take sides and align themselves with different camps. On the one hand we might have, say, the camp of the charismatic renewal, in which miracles, healings, tongues, etc., are held in high esteem; and on the other hand, conservative evangelicalism, the camp which recognizes that Jesus is the Logos of God, and that as such he very much wants us to use our minds and think along with him in our approach to him. This is the tension which Paul is referring to here in this chapter. In one's approach to God, is the mind engaged or not? That, as I have said, will be the context of our study in the fourteenth chapter which we will take next week.

Before we do so, however, it might be appropriate to look at the current state of the church as far as this tension is concerned. When I first came to this church 20 years ago, during the Jesus Movement of the 1960's, charismatic renewal tended to be much more divisive than it is today. Then, many Christians felt that their Christianity had to be an either/or affair. You were either a charismatic or an evangelical; there was no middle ground. Those who went the charismatic route tended to insist that speaking in tongues was required of all wholehearted Christians. Non-charismatics refused this point of view. The gap was wide and the two camps were quite distinct.

It seems to me that that these camps are much closer today than they were in those days. This may be observed by looking at a Christian organization such as the Committee on Biblical Exposition (COBE), for example, which has had leadership from both camps, charismatic and evangelical. The Mount Hermon Conference Center also, with its long tradition of Bible-teaching ministry, frequently welcomes leadership from both of the groupings we have referred to. The Lausanne Conference on Evangelism is another example of this. I want to quote from an excellent book (which I highly recommend) by Dr. J. I. Packer, *Keep In Step With The Spirit*. He says,

I suggest that in reality charismatic and non-charismatic spiritualities differ more in vocabulary, self-image, groups associated with, and books and journals read, than in the actual ingredients of their communion with the Father and the Son through the Spirit. Charismatic experience is less distinctive than it is sometimes made out.

## CONFLICT UNNECESSARY

It is inarguable that God has in the past, and will in the future, encounter individuals in both a rational and a trans-rational fashion. It is certainly normal to the Christian life to have moments when the joy of the Lord grips us, for no apparent reason; when a verse springs to mind at the exact moment we need to be reminded of its truth; when the Lord directs us to meet a need we feel no competence or desire to meet. I have participated in prayer meetings when we laid hands on demonized people, praying that God would directly encounter and destroy the forces of wickedness. Our elders have anointed the sick with oil and prayed for healing, and we have seen God act. There are then, times when God acts in powerful, unpredictable ways which he is not required to explain to us.

But it is also true to say that God bids us to understand his purposes and to expect him to act. He has made certain promises to his people, and he expects us to know what they are. Incarnation is at the heart of his message. We are his servants, friends, and co-laborers. As the speech of God, Jesus expects his followers to understand him. He is rational. We do have an explanation. We may on occasion have to confront evil in a sober, personal encounter, but we must also be familiar with the more commonplace manifestations of evil, the wiles of the devil, and the ways in which the flesh subtly tempts us to sin, so that we can understand them and act differently, applying the truth so that we are set free. God expects our spirituality to be rational. In fact, part of Paul's argument in chapter 14 is that the rational is greater than the trans-rational; the ministry of explanation is greater than the unintelligible prayer. But both are ingredients in the plan of God; and as such they should not conflict with each other.

## **JESUS' TEACHING AND SIGNS**

Let us look at some of the results in our Lord's ministry and try to learn from his experience when on the one hand miracles and healings occurred at his command, and on the other hand when he taught as a prophet and teacher setting out the deep things of God. Luke 4:31 says,

And He came down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee, and He was teaching them on the Sabbath days; and they were continually amazed at His teaching, for His message was with authority.

Jesus' teaching was powerful enough to awaken his listeners to the truth of what he had to share with them. It was clear, forceful and understandable, and it penetrated their minds and hearts.

Here is another example, from Mark 2:12, following the healing of the paralytic man:

And he rose and immediately took up the pallet and went out in the sight of all; so that they were amazed and were glorifying God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this."

Here again, these people were amazed but this time their amazement came as a result of our Lord's ability to do miraculous signs. From our perspective, however, amazement stems from Jesus' lack of success, in both his healing and teaching ministries, if we take changed lives as a measuring stick. Those who were astounded at what he did and what he said were among the very ones who, near the end, cried out, "Crucify him!"

Jesus himself said, following his miraculous feeding of the five thousand, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek Me not because you saw signs, but because you ate the loaves and were filled." "I'm your meal ticket," in other words, "that is why you are willing to respond. To you the signs did not portend an encounter with God. The only sign you saw was an opportunity for a free breakfast in the morning." To those who were following him and listening to his teaching, Jesus said, "You say to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' but you do not do what I say. Why do you call Me Lord and do not do the things that I say?" Neither his amazing miracles nor his amazing teaching had effected any real spiritual transformation.

Luke 11:29 says,

And as the crowds were increasing, He began to say, "This generation is a wicked generation; it seeks for a sign, and yet no sign shall be given it but the sign of Jonah. For just as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so shall the Son of Man be to this generation. The Queen of the South shall rise up with the men of this generation at the judgment and condemn them, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and behold, something greater than Solomon is here. The men of Ninevah shall stand up with this generation at the judgment and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here."

The wicked generation to whom Jesus was addressing himself sought one sign after another, yet they were unmoved. That is why Jesus refused to give them any more signs save the sign of Jonah, who was in the belly of the fish for three days. The last and only sign to them would be the resurrection. Our Lord ceased his ministry of miracles because they only aroused curiosity, not faith, while they rejected his ministry of teaching because of the hardness of their hearts. That is why he said that the Queen of the South, who came to Solomon to hear the wisdom of God, would condemn his generation because of their rejection of what he had to say to them. Likewise, the men of Ninevah, who repented their evil on hearing the message of Jonah, would reject that generation because they had not listened to one greater than Jonah, Jesus himself.

Neither the rational nor the trans-rational, seen and heard in its most glorious and purest form in the actions and words of the Lord himself, had the desired effect upon the masses. They observed, listened, and left.

### **APPROVED BY MEN OR GOD?**

John 12:36 says,

These things Jesus spoke and He departed and hid himself from them. But though He had performed so many signs before them, yet they were not believing in Him; that the word of Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled, which he spoke, "Lord, who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?"...These things Isaiah said, because he saw His glory, and he spoke of Him. Nevertheless many even of the rulers believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they were not confessing Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God.

Here we see that even some of those who believed in Jesus would not come to him lest they lose the approval of men by doing so.

Christians in both camps, those who are inclined to look for God to act in trans-rational ways-healings, miracles, tongues, etc.-or those who expect God to light their hearts with his words of truth, should see from these examples from the New Testament that God must do his mysterious, divine work in the hearts of those being ministered to or nothing will come of it. The key is not to be found in the giftedness of the messengers but in the penetrating effect upon the heart of the word spoken by the Spirit of God, that makes us long for his approval rather than that of men.

Jesus once asked of his disciples the poignant question, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" Faith is what God is seeking, no matter by what means he encounters people. When he comes, will he find faith?

### **SIGNS SHOULD SIGNIFY**

I am convinced that the ministry of the trans-rational is intended by God to be signatory. Thus one would expect to see the miraculous involvement of God manifested in places where strongholds of evil exist, where

idol-worship is rampant, where the grip of lies and wickedness is most pronounced. Dramatic testimony to the power of Christ acts as a trumpet-call-it commands attention so the truth may be told. This has been the experience of missionaries who brought the gospel to the darkest parts of this earth (not excluding strongholds of New Age idolatry or mammon-worship in this age). God will do miraculous things for his spokesmen so that people will hear their message of salvation.

Ultimately, however, signs have a limited usefulness. They are given to declare the power and presence of Christ and to issue the challenge of his Lordship. Challenge by itself, however, is not enough. That is why Paul declares in 1 Corinthians 14 that it is the preaching (prophesying) and teaching gifts that are greater. Signs awaken people to the presence and power of God; preaching and teaching explain who God is and call people to believe what God has to say.

## **A NEW COVENANT**

These thoughts about the gift of the Spirit given to minister to others led me to think further-of ways that the Spirit ministers within us. A passage in Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth concerning the ministry of the Holy Spirit is in many ways the theological heart of this church. Second Corinthians 2:6 describes a New Covenant with God in which the power of God is released in human lives. In and of themselves, neither dazzling miracles nor dynamic preaching guarantee spiritual transformation. The critical question is, Will the life of Jesus be reproduced in believers? Will we become, in Paul's description, vessels who hold a precious treasure ("that the surpassing greatness of the power of God may be from God and not from ourselves")? The heart is the arena in which the great and mysterious work of God is done. That is where change must ultimately occur.

Here then is what Paul calls the "ministry of the Spirit." Second Corinthians 4:4:

And such confidence we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. But if the ministry of death, in letters engraved on stones, came with glory, so that the sons of Israel could not look intently at the face of Moses because of the glory of his face, fading as it was, how shall the ministry of the Spirit fail to be even more with glory? For if the ministry of condemnation has glory, how much more does the ministry of righteousness abound in glory?

Commenting on this passage in his book *Authentic Christianity*, Ray Stedman says,

Behind everything else and at the root of it all was the Holy Spirit. The third Person of the Godhead himself, the gift of both Father and Son, serving as a guarantee of all else to come, dwelling permanently in his heart, was the uncreated source of all that sustained Paul. It was the Spirit's constant delight to release to Paul at all times the life of Jesus. Jesus himself, by the Spirit, lived in Paul and upheld and empowered him just as he purposes to live in us and uphold us and empower us through all our trials and tribulations, that the life of Jesus invariably consists of three elements: love, truth, and power. Thus, continually supplied to Paul, explaining all that he was and did, was 'genuine love,' 'truthful speech,' and the 'power of God.' No wonder he could handle life the way he did.

## **LOVE**

In the long run, the tension that existed in Corinth is unavoidable. Christians will always have one kind of expectation or the other. They will approve certain spokesmen, read certain books, and tend to congregate in certain groups. Paul does not rule out of court either type of ministry-that which appeals to our understanding or that which bypasses it ("Therefore my brethren, earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid to speak in

tongues." 1 Cor.14:39).

The church in every generation will experience some friction over these issues. But the point is, we must love each other. Love's pre-eminence is the heart and soul of all discussion of spiritual gifts.

In closing, here is how Paul summarizes Christian worship in 1 Thessalonians 5 :

See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all men. Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not quench the Spirit; do not despise prophetic utterances. But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil. Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.

Do not quench the Spirit.  
Examine everything carefully.  
Faithful is He who calls you and He also will bring it to pass.

These are words to live by today, as they were in Thessalonica and in Corinth 2,000 years ago.

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