

The Outpouring of the Holy Spirit, #7
Was the outpouring of the Spirit to last to the end of time?

Intro: In the NT we can clearly see that the outpouring of the Spirit was an important feature of the early church. We documented the existence of the gifts of the Spirit throughout the Roman world. Last week we raised the question, “Was the outpouring of the Spirit to last to the end of time?” We looked at three textual indicators.

The prophecy of Joel

The method of impartation

The prophecy of “the perfect”

Each of these methods would suggest that the outpouring of the Spirit would not continue to the second coming of Jesus. What we should expect then to find in the historical record is the cessation of spiritual gifts.

What insight could we gain from historical statements about the outpouring? It is interesting to read what the early church writers wrote on the subject of spiritual gifts. Most of those whose works have been preserved were leaders of various prominent congregations in the early history of the church; therefore, their testimony can not be quickly discarded without serious evaluation.

The fathers of the late first century acknowledge the common presence of spiritual gifts in the first century congregations.

Clement of Rome wrote apparently in behalf of the Roman church a letter to the church at Corinth. This epistle was highly esteemed by the early church, was read in many congregations in the second century, and was even found appended to the great Alexandrinus Codex. It is an appeal to the Corinthians for unity after a sedition occurred in which some of the elders were rejected and removed from service. Clement in addressing the problem seeks to remind them of their past.

Content with the provision which God had made for you, and carefully attending to His words, ye were inwardly filled with His doctrine, and His sufferings were before your eyes. Thus a profound and abundant peace was given to you all, and ye had an insatiable desire for doing good, while a full outpouring of the Holy Spirit was upon you all.

(Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians, chapter 2)

Let our whole body, then, be preserved in Christ Jesus; and let every one be subject to his neighbor, according to the special gift bestowed upon him. (Clement, chapter 38)

Clearly Clement acknowledges what the Scriptures also teach in 1 Cor. 12—that the Corinthians had received a full outpouring of the Spirit with each one receiving a gift. But in addition he appeals to this fact as the basis for unity among them, urging them to be subject to one another “according to the special gift bestowed upon him”. So we have in this late first century epistle confirmation of the NT teaching and showing the continuing use of the gifts in the late first century..

In the second century (100's) we see evidence that spiritual gifts continued to exist in Christians, these apparently having been imparted through the apostles. *Epistle of Barnabas (c. 130 AD) was a highly regarded work of early origin, read in the churches and appended to the great Sinaiticus Codex. But there is considerable doubt among scholars that it originated from Barnabas, the companion of Paul as the title might suggest. However, whoever the author it reflects the thinking of a disciple in the early second century.*

Seeing that the divine fruits of righteousness abound among you, I rejoice exceedingly and above measure in your happy and honored spirits, because ye have with such effect received the engrafted spiritual gift. Wherefore also I inwardly rejoice the more, hoping to be saved, because I truly perceive in you the Spirit poured forth from the rich Lord of love. (Epistle of Barnabas, chapter one)

But it shall be built, observe ye, in the name of the Lord, in order that the temple of the Lord may be built in glory. How? Learn [as follows]. Having received the forgiveness of sins, and placed our trust in the name of the Lord, we have become new creatures, formed again from the beginning. Wherefore in our habitation God truly dwells in us. How? His word of faith; His calling of promise; the wisdom of the statutes; the commands of the doctrine; He himself prophesying in us; He himself dwelling in us; opening to us who were enslaved by death the doors of the temple, that is, the mouth; and by giving us repentance introduced us into the incorruptible temple. He then, who wishes to be saved, looks not to man, but to Him who dwelleth in him, and speaketh in him, amazed at never having either heard him utter such words with his mouth, nor himself having ever desired to hear them. This is the spiritual temple built for the Lord. (Barnabas 16:9)

Ignatius (50-117?) was an early church father and "bishop" of the church at Antioch who suffered martyrdom in Rome. On his way to Rome he wrote a number of epistles to churches which have been preserved (7 of them are regarded as authentic, including this letter to the Philadelphians)..

For, when I was among you, I cried, I spoke with a loud voice: Give heed to the bishop, and to the presbytery and deacons. Now, some suspected me of having spoken thus, as knowing beforehand the division caused by some among you. But He is my witness, for whose sake I am in bonds, that I got no intelligence from any man. But the Spirit proclaimed these words: Do nothing without the bishop; keep your bodies as the temples of God; love unity; avoid divisions; be the followers of Jesus Christ, even as He is of His Father. (Ignatius, Epistle to the Philadelphians, chapter 7).

Second century apologist, Justin Martyr (100-165) recorded an interesting debate with a Jew named Trypho in which he argues that the Holy Spirit ceased His revelatory work among the Jews when Christ came and that the evidence of that was that the Jews no longer had prophets but that the prophetic gift had come to Christians.

"For the prophetic gifts remain with us, even to the present time. And hence you ought to understand that [the gifts] formerly among your nation have been transferred to us. (Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho, chapter 72)

Accordingly He rested, i.e., ceased, when He came, after whom, in the times of this dispensation wrought out by Him amongst men, it was requisite that such gifts should cease from you; and having received their rest in Him, should again, as had been predicted, become gifts which, from the grace of His Spirit's power, He imparts to those who believe in Him, according as He deems each man worthy thereof. I have already said, and do again say, that it had been prophesied that this would be done by Him after His ascension to heaven. It is accordingly said, 'He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, He gave gifts unto the sons of men.' And again, in another prophecy it is said: 'And it shall come to pass after this, I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh, and on My servants, and on My handmaids, and they shall prophesy. "Now, it is possible to see amongst us women and men who possess gifts of the Spirit of God; so that it was prophesied that the powers enumerated by Isaiah would come upon Him, not because He needed power, but because these would not continue after Him (Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho, Chapter 88, 150 AD).

By the early third century (200's) we see that spiritual gifts have now diminished and only traces of the gifts exist among Christians.

Origin in his work "Against Celsus" takes up numerous arguments by this false teacher in opposition to Christianity. Among them is his response to Celsus' argument that he could find experiences comparable to the prophecies of Jews and Christians in the pagan world.

Moreover, the Holy Spirit gave signs of His presence at the beginning of Christ's ministry, and after His ascension He gave still more; but since that time these signs have diminished, although there are still traces of His presence in a few who have had their souls purified by the Gospel, and their actions regulated by its influence. "For the holy Spirit of discipline will flee deceit, and remove from thoughts that are without understanding." (Origen, "Against Celsus", Book 7, chapter 8)

It may be difficult to imagine spiritual gifts in existence to the time of Origin who lived from about 190 to 250 AD. However, it is clear that Origin acknowledges that spiritual gifts had "diminished" from the time of the apostolic outpouring and that there existed only "traces of His presence in a few".

In the fourth century we see that spiritual gifts have apparently completely vanished among the disciples.

It is also interesting to see John Chrysostom's (c. 347-407) explanation of what occurred in the first century

Whoever was baptized he straightway spake with tongues and not with tongues only, but many also prophesied, and some also performed many other wonderful works. For since on their coming over from idols, without any clear knowledge or training in the ancient Scriptures, they at once on their baptism received the Spirit, yet the Spirit they saw not, for It is invisible; therefore God's grace bestowed some sensible proof of that energy. And one straightway spake in the Persian, another in the Roman, another in the Indian, another in some other such tongue: and this made manifest to them that were without that it is the Spirit in the very person speaking. (Chrysostom, Homily 1 Cor., chapter 29)

But Chrysostom is very clear that the phenomenon of spiritual gifts no longer exists in his day:

This whole place is very obscure: but the obscurity is produced by our ignorance of the facts referred to and by their cessation, being such as then used to occur but now no longer take place. And why do they not happen now? Why look now, the cause too of the obscurity hath produced us again another question: namely, why did they then happen, and now do so no more? (John Chrysostom, Homily on 1 Cor. 12, chapter 29, of the Ante-Nicene Fathers)

Keep in mind that he lived in Rome where spiritual gifts had existed and where Paul had hoped to impart spiritual gifts (Rom. 1:11.) He associated the gifts with an earlier phase in the church's establishment and recognized their cessation.

Augustine (354-430)

In the earliest times, "the Holy Ghost fell upon them that believed, and they spake with tongues," which they had not learned, "as the Spirit gave them utterance." These were signs adapted to the time. For there behooved to be that betokening of the Holy Spirit in all tongues, to shew that the Gospel of God was to run through all tongues over the whole earth. That thing was done for a betokening, and it passed away. (Augustine, Homily on 1 Jn. 3)

In sum, the historical evidence lines up quite well with the projected time-frame derived from the Scriptures themselves.

Using Joel 2:28 we predicted that spiritual gifts would cease before the fall of the Roman Empire. Chrysostom confirms that this was the case over a hundred years before the fall of Rome.

Using the procedure of impartation, we suggested that spiritual gifts might linger into the second or early third century at the latest. The church fathers are clear in showing a diminishing of the gifts over this period of time with none by the early 300's.

Using the "the perfect" of 1 Cor. 13 we suggested that the outpouring might last until the Scripture could be gathered and effectively used by the churches of the empire. The Muratorian Canon is a list of books

***acknowledged by the second-century church to be of apostolic origin. FF
Bruce writes:***

1. Another early list, also of Roman provenance, dated about the end of the second century, is that commonly called the 'Muratorian Fragment', because it was first published in Italy in 1740 by the antiquarian Cardinal L. A. Muratori. It is unfortunately mutilated at the beginning, but it evidently mentioned Matthew and Mark, because it refers to Luke as the third Gospel; then it mentions John, Acts, Paul's nine letters to churches and four to individuals (Philemon, Titus, I and 2 Timothy), Jude, two Epistles of John, and the Apocalypse of John and that of Peter.' The *Shepherd* of Hermas is mentioned as worthy to be read (i.e. in church) but not to be included in the number of prophetic or apostolic writings. (The NT Books, Are they Reliable, FF. Bruce, chapter 3)

2. Here then we see that all 27 books of our NT were already acknowledged to be authentic by the end of the second century. And there is evidence to support the idea that congregations had access to these books.

Thus, all evidence seems to point us in the same direction. The outpouring of the Spirit was limited in duration for the purposes of revelation and confirmation of the word until the written Scriptures could be preserved.

Conclusion: So the historical record accords with the evidence of the OT and NT statements about the duration of spiritual gifts. What are the implications for us? Clearly if such gifts ceased, should we expect them now? If yes, on what conditions? If no, how do we deal with the texts where spiritual gifts are under consideration?