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CHRISTIANIZING SPIRITUAL MANIFESTATIONS: WORLDVIEWS AND SPIRITUAL GIFTS IN 1 CORINTHIANS 12-14

Steve Bryan

Introduction

When a person comes to faith, it is merely the beginning of a transformation which continues throughout their lives. A believer's life undergoes change at the moment of conversion, but this by no means implies that the believer actions and thoughts from that point forward are fully part of a thoroughly Christian worldview. It is for this reason that the New Testament urges believers not to "be conformed to this world but to be transformed by the renewing of your minds" (Rom 12:1-2). But if this is a widely acknowledged fact of the Christian life, it is often overlooked when it comes to the Spirit in the practice of spiritual gifts. Since spiritual gifts are manifestations of God's Spirit, it is commonly assumed that the way in which Christians manifest the Spirit through the practice of spiritual gifts will always be pleasing to God: whatever happens is simply what the Spirit does and who can question the Spirit? The purpose of this paper is to show that this is not the case. Rather, the New Testament indicates that our practice of spiritual gifts, like the rest of our life in the Spirit, can be influenced by the worldview which we possessed before we were converted. It is thus entirely possible that we may use the gifts of the Spirit in ways that reflect an essentially pagan worldview. In the West, people are often converted out of worldviews which have little or no experience of spiritual manifestations. However, in much of the world, especially in Africa, spiritual manifestations are often very much a part of the experience of people before they come to Christ and the understanding of these experiences may influence the way in which they think about manifestations produced by the Holy Spirit as part of their Christian experience.

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In 1 Corinthians, Paul addresses a group of believers who had experienced a remarkable outpouring of spiritual gifts. Paul comments in 1 Corinthians 1:7 that they did “not lack any spiritual gift”. Yet, as the letter makes clear, the believers continued to be influenced by the worldview from which they had been saved, most especially in their practice of spiritual gifts. In particular, Paul argues that the way in which they were practicing their spiritual gifts (as with much else in their Christian lives) was far too influenced by the way their knowledge and experience of spiritual manifestations when they were unbelievers.

At the beginning of 1 Corinthians 12 (vv. 1-2) Paul tells the Corinthians that he does not want them to be ignorant or without knowledge in regard to spiritual gifts and then immediately reminds them of the time when they were without knowledge, i.e. when they were still pagans. Paul’s presupposition is that the way the Corinthians were practicing and thinking about their spiritual gifts was, to some degree, marked by pagan ignorance. What this suggests then is that Paul’s instructions about spiritual gifts in these chapters are largely driven by his assessment that the Corinthians’ attitudes towards spiritual gifts remained too much controlled by pagan ideas about spiritual manifestations. The contrast which Paul draws between pagan and Christian notions of spiritual manifestations is one of the most crucial yet often overlooked dimensions to Paul’s discussion of spiritual gifts. The burden of what Paul says to them is that *they must develop distinctly Christian ways of thinking about their experience and manifestation of the Spirit.*

I wish then to highlight a number of elements in Paul’s teaching about spiritual gifts in which the apostle seeks to Christianize the manifestations of the Holy Spirit which were being experienced by the church at Corinth. In doing so, Paul distinguishes the practice of the gifts of the Spirit from those notions about spiritual manifestations which the Corinthians brought to their new Christian faith from the pagan worldview which they had not yet fully left behind.

Paul, the Spirit, and the Spirits at Corinth

1. The fact that spiritual gifts are manifestations of the Spirit in no way exempts these gifts from misuse and distortion, especially under the influence of pre-Christian conceptions of spiritual manifestations.

It is often assumed that because the gifts are manifestations of the Spirit they can only be understood as what the Spirit does and therefore may not be questioned. On the other hand, it is sometimes supposed that if a particular

manifestation takes an unbiblical form the manifestation must be demonic. Paul takes neither view, arguing instead that manifestations of the Holy Spirit may be subject to distortion and misuse, especially when the assumptions of a pre-Christian worldview are allowed to shape the way in which spiritual manifestations are displayed in the Christian community.

Recent scholarship on the Corinthian correspondence has highlighted the extent to which the Corinthian church remained very much under the influence of the wider culture. The fact that in one or two places Paul objects to the way in which some Corinthian Christians had attempted to stake out a Christian position vis à vis the wider culture should caution us against assuming that these Christians had made no effort to distinguish themselves from their pagan past.¹ Doubtless, in some cases they did so successfully (cf. 1 Cor 11:2). But there is mounting evidence that often they did not.

Much of the focus has fallen on the influence of cultural norms regarding self-presentation, leadership, patron-client relationships, social status, and power, especially in 1 Corinthians 1-6 and in 1 Corinthians 11. Other problems in the Corinthian church have also been traced to the influence of the Corinthians' pagan past, including cultural attitudes toward sexual ethics, marriage, and the giving of money.² However, relatively little attention has been given to the influence of Corinthian cultural mores on the practice of spiritual manifestations. The tendency of a previous generation of scholarship to identify various elements of the worship in the Corinthian church as overtly pagan now commands little support. But even if pagan spirits were not active in the church at Corinth, it is still possible that the Corinthians' pagan past may have influence on their understanding and practice of spiritual manifestations. Garland states that Paul "does not

1. Note, for instance, Paul's objection to inappropriate applications of Christian freedom which had led to sexual immorality "of a kind that does not occur even among pagans" (5:1) and his objection to Christian participation in pagan feasts involving food associated with idols based on a wrong application of "knowledge" of God's oneness and the corresponding unreality of idols (8:1-14).

2. The bibliography of works which attempt to situate the Corinthian correspondence in the social setting of first century Corinth is vast. The depth of influence of the surrounding culture on the Corinthian believers generally and their pagan past particularly has been highlighted with particular clarity by Bruce W. Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth: The Influence of Secular Ethics and Social Change* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

insinuate that they have allowed their former pagan worship to infect their Christian worship.”³ But pagan ideas about worship may indeed have shaped their Christian worship. The extent of Paul’s concern about the influence of their pre-Christian experience elsewhere in Corinthians suggests that the reference to the Corinthians’ pagan past in 12:1 reflects Paul’s concern that the practice of spiritual manifestations was unduly influenced by a pagan worldview. Interpreters differ on the specific point of contrast which Paul has in mind when he reminds them of their pagan past, but “all interpreters agree that Paul stresses the inadequacy of any ‘knowledge’ about what constitutes ‘the spiritual’ if it is decisively shaped by expectations and assumptions carried over from pre-conversion days.”⁴

Thus, Paul did not regard manifestations of the Spirit as *inherently* immune from distortion and abuse. The Corinthians may not lack for any spiritual gift (1:7), but they clearly suffered from considerable immaturity in the way they were practicing the gifts. Paul begins his letter with a section of thanksgiving to God for the many spiritual gifts which were being manifest at Corinth (1:4-7), but this in no way suggests that he approved of how the Corinthians were making use of their gifts. The fundamentally corrective nature of what Paul says concerning the practice of spiritual gifts in I Corinthians 12-14 renders it unlikely that Paul regards spiritual manifestations as incapable of abuse.

However, Paul’s response to distortions in the manifestation of the Spirit does not assume the influence of demonic spirits. In contemporary practice, it is sometimes assumed that if a particular spiritual manifestation is displayed in inappropriate way, the manifestation must be empowered by an evil spirit rather than the Spirit of God. But Paul does not say that the influence of their pagan past meant that the spiritual manifestations of the Corinthians were demonic. In such a circumstance, one would expect a far more vehement response. But Paul neither rejects the spiritual manifestations evident at Corinth nor seeks to exclude them from the community. Rather, he acknowledges their origin in the work of the Spirit (12:7-11) and aims to align their use more fully with the character of God and the nature of the Christian community.

3. David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 566.

4. Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 913.

Paul believes that the Corinthians' manifestations of the authentic Spirit could be shaped by their pagan past. In many cases, we would do well to follow Paul's example in this regard. Some churches have responded to abuses by asserting that the activity associated with the abuses was demonic and then eliminating all practice of the gifts which were being abused. Paul does neither. He affirms the Corinthians in their reception of the gifts of the Spirit and yet sought to correct the misunderstanding which arose because they had not yet fully understood the character of the Holy Spirit. This might mean that we tell our people that we affirm their giftedness, but before we release them for public use of their gifts we want to provide them with the training they need to use their gifts effectively and biblically. 1 Corinthians 12-14 provides Paul's own attempt to provide a framework in which spiritual gifts may be practiced in a God-honoring way.

2. Spiritual gifts are manifestations of God's grace and thus do not serve as a measure of spirituality and cannot be acquired by manipulative means.

Efforts to determine the precise point of contrast intended by Paul in setting his discussion of spiritual manifestations over against the prior pagan spiritual experience of the Corinthians have not proved wholly convincing.⁵ It may be that Paul intends a more general, multi-faceted contrast, and this is what the following discussion assumes. As Thiselton puts it, Paul intends the pre-Christian and Christian frameworks as "comparative frames of reference" for determining what it means to be spiritual.⁶ One aspect of their pre-Christian experience that Paul addresses is the use of particular spiritual manifestations as a measure of status within the community. At Corinth, a division seems to have arisen between those in the community who wanted to make their more spectacular gifts a primary indication of spirituality and

5. Gordon Fee notes that because Paul does not make explicit the specific element of the Corinthians' pagan past about which he wants to remind them, many scholars have looked elsewhere for evidence. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 577. One common approach has been to suppose that Paul intends a contrast between the ecstatic utterances of the Corinthians when they were pagans with the *glossolalia* and prophecy they now experienced as Christians. However, Christopher Forbes has demonstrated that ecstatic experience was not a universal feature of pagan religion at the time Paul wrote, *Prophecy and Inspired Speech in Early Christianity and its Hellenistic Environment* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1995).

6. Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 916.

status within the community.⁷ Paul rejects the belief of some Corinthians that the same is true of Christians. Instead he argues that the capacity to produce inspired speech or some other manifestation has no necessary correlation with a person's spirituality.

The term *pneumatika* seems to have been the Corinthians' preferred way of referring to spiritual manifestations, particularly the more spectacular manifestations.⁸ Paul, however, with one exception (14:1), prefers the term *charismata* (12:4, 9, 28, 30, 31). This is because Paul wants the Corinthians to think of the manifestations as *charismata* which issue from divine *charis*. They are gifts granted to us by God's grace. As with all experiences of God's grace, we receive what God gives us not because of who we are or what we have done or how spiritual we are. Rather, we receive God's grace despite who we are and what we have done according to God's will. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12:11, "All the gifts are the work of one and the same Spirit who gives to each one just as he wills." These *charismata* which God gives are not limited to the more spectacular manifestations, which was perhaps the primary sense of the Corinthians' use of *pneumatika*. Rather, Paul gathers up a wide variety of spiritual ministries and regards them alike as graces.

We see then that one principal point of contrast between the Corinthians prior spiritual experience as pagans and their experience of the Spirit as Christians is that the Spirit-produced phenomena manifest by Christians do not elevate an individual's status or provide an indication of heightened spirituality. This idea is a very common feature of contemporary traditional religions in which a person who is able to produce spectacular spiritual

7. Recent studies of the social dynamics within the Corinthian church have highlighted status issues generally and the elevated status associated with esoteric speech in Greco-Roman society in particular. Dale Martin notes that "esoteric speech... is usually considered a high status activity *except* in western, rationalistic societies..." *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 558, cited in David G. Horrell, *The Social Ethos of the Corinthian Correspondence: Interests and Ideology from 1 Corinthians to 1 Clement*, Studies of the New Testament and Its World (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 177.

8. The form of the word used in 12:1 may be either neuter ("spiritual manifestations" or "spiritual gifts") or masculine ("spiritual ones"). That Paul has in mind the neuter form seems clear from the use of the neuter form in 14:1 and from his exchange of the word with his own preferred term *charismata*—a neuter form—in the ensuing discussion.

manifestations is regarded as having special contact with the spirit world and enjoys an elevated status in the community. It is also a presupposition of many Christians today, particularly in Africa, who regard those through whom particular spiritual manifestations are given as possessing special status within a community or assume that such individuals are especially spiritual. For Paul, however, the fact that spiritual manifestations originate in a sovereign act of divine grace means that the individuals who experience them must not be elevated within the community.

Closely related to Paul's point that spiritual manifestations are sovereignly given endowments of grace is the implication that manifestations of the Spirit may not be self-generated or acquired by manipulative means. Spiritual manifestations may not be produced by inducing a heightened emotional state or, in the case of gifts of inspired speech, by mimicking the forms of speech produced by others. Paul clearly believes that not every manifestation at Corinth has the approval of the Spirit. Yet it is also true that Paul just as Paul does not attribute such inappropriate manifestations to demonic activity, he also does not directly charge the Corinthian believers with faking or counterfeiting spiritual manifestations. The elevated status associated with certain spiritual gifts at Corinth, especially tongues, may well have produced pressure in this direction. However, Paul does not denounce any of the manifestations at Corinth as either false or fabricated, even when he believes they are inappropriate. Rather, he addresses the underlying beliefs in the Corinthian church which led to or created the motivation for the display of manifestations which he believed to be inconsistent with a Christian understanding of spiritual gifts. From a pastoral point of view, Paul is concerned not simply with phenomena that he judges to be inappropriate, but with the root causes of the phenomena in a worldview not yet fully shaped by the conviction that a sovereign God gives gifts because of his grace and not because he is manipulated or induced to do so.

3. In contrast to the localization of spiritual power among a spiritual elite within paganism, all believers have a common endowment of the Spirit.

One of the ideas that Paul seeks to correct is that the manifestation of the Spirit was evident exclusively or even primarily through gifts of inspired speech or other similarly impressive spiritual manifestations. Some time ago I learned of a woman who was severely ill in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Her neighbors and relatives all encouraged her to go to Awassa, a city in southern Ethiopia, because there was a witch doctor there was known to be

have spiritual power, who, if presented with appropriate gifts, might be persuaded to access this power on her behalf. As in pagan religion generally, the assumption was that spiritual power was concentrated in just a few individuals who had the expertise to access the power. Similarly, at Corinth, there seem to have been some who believed that the ability to produce certain spiritual phenomena, especially tongues and prophecy, served as proof that some believers possessed the Spirit in a way that others did not: “Paul is concerned to refute those Corinthians who claim their gift of *glossolalia* is a special, perhaps unique, demonstration of spirit possession”.⁹ He corrects this notion with the assertion that all who confess Jesus to be Lord do so by the Spirit and so have the Spirit (12:3).¹⁰ Paul “wants to affirm from the start that all the members of the body of Christ are spiritual.”¹¹ He then goes on to assert not only that all had been baptized by one Spirit into one body (12:13) but also that each one of the believers had been given at least one manifestation of the Spirit (12:7).

Whether or not our churches are Pentecostal, we must strongly affirm that all believers are gifted, that all the gifts are Spirit-inspired. We have erred badly in allowing our people to continue in the belief that certain spiritual manifestations distinguish those who have the Spirit from those who do not or who have the Spirit in lesser measure. The concept of the uniquely “anointed” person is foreign to biblical Christianity, precisely because all believers have the Spirit and possess Spirit-inspired gifts. We must firmly resist the widespread assumption, for instance, that the person who has the gift of administration or of helps is somehow less spiritual than the person who has the gift of prophecy or healing. Paul rejects as pagan the idea that spiritual power is localized or concentrated among a spiritual elite.

4. In contrast to the elevation of those who manifest spiritual power within paganism, manifestations of spiritual power among believers are to be used for the common good.

9. Julette M. Bassler, “1 Cor 12:3—Curse or Confession in Context,” *JBL* 101 (1982): 416.

10. Thiselton catalogues the myriad of proposals regarding the circumstance under which someone might declare that Jesus is cursed, but the primary point of 12:3 is clear: only by the agency of the Spirit is it possible to for a person to confess Jesus as Lord as an expression of one’s fundamental commitment and belief, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 916–27.

11. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 572.

As noted above, within pagan religion, those who are able to produce impressive spiritual manifestations are often given an elevated religious and social status within their community. That this idea had also come to influence the Corinthian believers is reflected in the fact that much of what Paul says in ch. 12 particularly is directed against the belief that those who possessed certain spiritual gifts constituted a spiritual elite within the church. We see this in three related arguments set forth by Paul.

a. Though gifts differ among believers, the differences are to be understood not as indications of superior spiritual power but as necessary variations in the way each believer contributes to the common good and as vital witness to the centrality of the cross.

This is particularly clear in Paul's use of the metaphor of the body (12:14-26). As Paul indicates, if everyone possessed the same gift there would be no body (v. 18). Thus, each part of the body, each gift plays a vital role in the healthy functioning of the body. And this is by God's design: "God arranged the parts of the body just as he wanted them to be" (v. 18). But though Paul's metaphor of the body is commonly seen as way of setting out the theme of unity in diversity, Paul seems to have something more in mind. It is not simply that the elevation of those with esteemed gifts disdains the need for all different sorts of ministry in a properly functioning community. It is also the case that the elevation of those perceived to have superior spiritual power contradicts Paul's theology of the cross according to which those who are "unimpressive," "less honorable," even "unpresentable" (12:22-23) are the ones who must be honored.¹²

b. Though certain gifts are regarded as superior to others, their superiority lies not in their extraordinary character but in their relative ability to contribute to the common good (12:31; 14:5, 12).

Paul consistently downplays the importance of speaking in tongues in the public meetings of the church because of the relative inability of tongues to bring about the edification of the community. The gift of tongues is

12. Thiselton, building on the work of Dale Martin, demonstrates that this section accords with Paul's earlier emphasis (in 1 Corinthians 1-2) on the way that a value system ordered by a crucified Christ effects reversals of status within the Christian community, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1006-9 *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1006-9.

inferior to the other gifts because it contributes relatively little to the common good. Paul tells the Corinthians that they should seek to excel in those gifts which are particularly capable of building up the church. This is perhaps the single most important criticism that needs to be made against some of the more extreme manifestations which we see in our churches: they are wholly focused on the spiritual experience of the individual. Paul relegates spiritual manifestations or experiences which do not build up the believing community to private settings outside the community (14:28).

c. Though inspired by the Spirit, the practice of certain spiritual gifts requires particular care in order to effect the good of others.

The importance of ensuring that public spiritual manifestations be oriented toward the common good is reflected throughout 1 Corinthians 12-14 in a variety of ways. Perhaps most important is the fact that Paul makes 1 Corinthians 13 and its assertion of the primacy and priority of love over all the gifts of the Spirit the focal point of his discussion of the gifts. But the dominance of the concern for the good of others in Paul's discussion of spiritual gifts also generates Paul's specific instructions regarding the gifts. This concern is evident in Paul's insistence that the meetings of the church reflect a healthy diversity in the practice of gifts. No single gift should be allowed to dominate - the concern for the common good generates the restrictions on the numbers of those who prophesy or speak in tongues to two or at most three (1 Cor 14:27-29). Paul says that uninterpreted tongues cannot promote the common good, and insists that those who speak in tongues publicly must be certain that their utterances will be interpreted either by themselves or others (14:28). He also warns that uninterpreted tongues can actually bring about judgment for unbelievers who are repulsed by the unintelligibility of tongues (14:23). Paul's concern for the common good also prompts his instructions that prophecy should be practiced in such a way as to maximize its capacity to teach and encourage. (14:29-31).

All of this suggests a fundamental criterion which we should use in determining whether or not particular practices should be encouraged or discouraged: does the practice contribute to the good of the whole community. We need not tell enthusiasts that manifestations which we would regard as extreme are from the devil; we simply teach them the biblical principle that only that which contributes to the good of the whole community has a place in the public meetings of the church. Everything else is discouraged.

5. In contrast to the uncontrolled and disorderly spiritual manifestations within paganism, believers must exercise the gifts of the Spirit in a controlled and orderly way.

A very common assumption is that authentic manifestations of the Spirit, particularly those which involve inspired speech, are especially evident when a person is in an ecstatic state, that is, when a person is not conscious of or in control of what is happening. We have noted above the argument of Christopher Forbes that there is little basis in the Hellenistic sources for the idea that spiritual manifestations among the Corinthian believers, especially those involving inspired speech, had been shaped by ecstatic spiritual experiences in their pre-Christian past.¹³ Though Forbes is likely correct that the inspired speech forms of early Christian prophecy do not have precise parallels in Hellenistic religions, he does not offer an explanation of the contrast Paul puts forward in 12:2 nor consider similarities which may appear from a broader comparison of phenomena arising from the influence of a spirit.

Despite the significant differences between Christian inspired speech and pagan prophecy, Paul's dual reference in 12:2 to their experience of being "led away" when they were pagans may suggest a fundamental difference in the nature of the influence they now experience as recipients of the Holy Spirit.¹⁴ Indeed Forbes acknowledges "that the Corinthians may have held, from their pre-Christian experience, that divine inspiration was an overwhelming phenomenon, not to be resisted".¹⁵ There is much then to commend Aune's contention that Paul "was in all probability referring to pagan religious experiences of possession trance." Aune thus offers this

13. Forbes's focus falls rather narrowly on the conceptual differences between related forms of inspired speech. For instance, in relation to prophecy, he shows that in contrast to Hellenistic religions early Christian prophecy eschewed divination, was unsolicited, and was charismatic rather than institutionalized, *Prophecy*, 308.

14. Terence Paige has argued that 12:2 refers to the Corinthians previous participation in cultic parades and translates "Whenever you were led [in the processions] you were really being carried away captive." "1 Corinthians 12.2: A Pagan *Pompe?*" *JSNT* 44 (1991): 57-65. Paul's point then is then the contrast between the previous experience of being led into slavery to idolatry and their current experience of being led by the Spirit. However, this general point is rather removed from the specific problems with the practice of spiritual manifestations which Paul addresses in this section of his letter.

15. Forbes, *Prophecy*, 318.

translation of 12:2: "You know that when you were heathen, you would be seized by some power which drove you to those dumb heathen gods."¹⁶ The assumption among the Corinthians seems to have been that if the person is not in control of what is happening then the manifestation must be solely under the control and direction of the Spirit, and this is an assumption which appears to have significant parallels in the understanding of spiritual manifestations within pagan religion. Aune notes, for instance, the way in which the "inspired mantics" based their authority on the behavioral phenomena associated with a trance-like state.¹⁷ Spiritual manifestations in which individuals experiencing spirit-possession exhibited an absence of control or a trance-like state played a significant role in Ancient Greco-Roman pagan religion, as in many modern forms of traditional religion.

Paul, however, is concerned to distinguish Christian experience of the Spirit from these kinds of uncontrolled manifestations. For Paul, the sort of behavioral phenomena associated with at least some pagan spiritual manifestations must not serve as authentication or authorization of gifts of the Spirit. Paul develops this idea in three related points:

a. Paul, like the NT authors generally, does not describe the Christian experience of the Spirit as possession but as a baptism (12:13).

As the Pentecostal scholar Gordon Fee notes, the language of baptism refers to our entrance into the sphere of the Spirit's influence at the time of conversion.¹⁸ The NT never describes this influence as producing in an individual a loss of conscious control. Quite the opposite: *self-control* is listed as one of the fruits of the Spirit's influence (Gal 5:23).

16. David E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 257. For a review of the Greco-Roman evidence, see especially pp. 23-48. Note also the comment of L. T. Johnson who states that pagan inspiration "was possession in the strictest sense" in that the prophet "lost his own consciousness" becoming a passive instrument of the god, and could neither know nor control what he said...", "Norms for True and False Prophecy in First Corinthians," *American Benedictine* 22 (1971): 33, cited in Forbes, *Prophecy*, 28.

17. Aune, *Prophecy*, 44.

18. Fee, *Corinthians*, 603-6.

b. Manifestations of the Spirit must be intentional since believers are responsible to ensure that they are directed toward the building up of others (14:26).

The manifestation of the Spirit must be intentionally directed toward the building up of others (14:26). Paul repeatedly stresses that the actions of members of the body of Christ must be guided by the desire to build others up. Thus, the manifestations of the Spirit must be consciously guided by the rational desire to edify others. This kind of intentionality would not be possible with spiritual manifestations over which the individual does not have control.

c. The regulations which Paul imposes on the gifts of prophecy and tongues presuppose that those who possess these gifts retain rational control over them.

According to Paul, speaking in tongues does not simply happen, it is a conscious choice of the speaker. Thus, if three people have already spoken in tongues, then any others who may feel the desire to speak in tongues must consciously resist that desire (14:27). Similarly, if three people have already prophesied, then any others who want to prophesy must rationally reject that desire (14:29). Moreover, Paul says that if a revelation comes to a person while another person is prophesying, the one who is prophesying should consciously decide to stop prophesying (14:30). In no circumstance should more than one person be prophesying at a time (14:31). In this way, no one is missed “because of the self-importance or supposed ‘possession’ of a particular speaker.”¹⁹ All of this presupposes, that even with gifts of inspired speech the speaker retains rational control: “the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets” (14:32).

d. Our manifestations of the Spirit must reflect the nature of God who gives the Spirit (14:33, 40).

Paul bases his regulation of the gifts of inspired speech on an understanding of the character of God. God is not a God of disorder but of peace (v. 33). So the manifestations of the Spirit of this God will reflect his character of order and peace. This in no way rules out spontaneity, broad participation by many, the occurrence of the unexpected and unplanned, and

19. Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1144.

the free-working of the Spirit. But this freedom of the Spirit will never become uncontrolled. As Richard Hayes comments, "In Paul's vision for Christian worship there is neither stiff formality nor undisciplined frenzy".²⁰ Gordon Fee adds, "The character of one's deity is reflected in the character of one's worship".²¹

Concluding Practical Remarks

Emerging from these observations on Scripture come a series of practical reflections. First, we will do well to avoid language which polarizes or which alienates the young spiritual enthusiasts in our churches. If they, like the Corinthians, bring perspectives which are less than Christian to their practice of spiritual gifts, it is not because they have fallen under demonic influence but because they have not been taught. Similarly, though Paul clearly does regard some spiritual manifestations as inappropriate, he does not level the charge that some of the manifestations are fabricated or fake. Perhaps, he would regard a faked spiritual manifestation on much the same terms as a genuine spiritual gift practiced in a self-serving way. Both are inconsistent with the notion that spiritual manifestations are graces given by a sovereign God for the good of the community rather than phenomena induced or manipulated in a way that elevates the status of the individual within the community. Second, and related to the first, we have often failed in our responsibility to provide those who minister in our churches with the training they need to use their gifts effectively and biblically, that is, to practice their spiritual gifts within the framework of a fully Christian worldview. We must create a culture of training for ministry in our churches in which it is well and widely known that those who minister publicly do so only after they have received training in the use of their gifts. This could perhaps be tied to membership classes, and membership made a requirement for all who minister in the church.²² Fourth, we must communicate to our

20. Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), 243.

21. Fee, *Corinthians*, 697.

22. Exceptions, of course, would need to be made in the case of those we invite from outside to minister within our churches. But even such people must be carefully screened, so that unbiblical or unhealthy models of ministry are not inadvertently introduced. For instance, it would do little good to discourage uninterpreted tongues within our services if we then invite evangelists to preach in our churches who speak in uninterpreted tongues.

people the criteria by which we determine what we will discourage and what we will encourage within our churches. Often extreme practices are tolerated or overlooked because we do not have clear, biblical criteria for determining pastoral practice. Three such criteria are particularly important: 1) all that happens within the public meetings of the churches must be oriented toward the common good; 2) all spiritual manifestations must occur in a way that demonstrates that the one through whom the manifestation occurs remains in rational control of the manifestation; 3) all spiritual manifestations must occur in a way that reflects the nature of God as a God of order and peace.

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