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Spiritual Gifts: The Biblical Basis

In the current discussion of spiritual gifts¹ it seems reasonable to conclude that a great deal of the division among Christians has to do with the interpretation of the Biblical evidence. Questions which we had, traditionally, assumed had been answered, and issues which we had assumed had been closed have been brought to the fore once again, often in ways which directly challenge the traditional exegesis. If this challenge had been posed by a sect or by a minority group within our fellowships, we might well have been justified in ignoring it. However, the undeniable experience of countless sincerely born-again believers in every denominational grouping worldwide forces us to a reappraisal. In the second half of the 20th Century, spiritual gifts have become a fact of church life, and we can ignore them only by turning back the clock and mentally opting out of the generation in which we live.

In the light of a situation which has been forced on many of us, we must re-examine the biblical evidence if we are to both meet the challenge and reap the opportunities of our time.

One of the weaknesses of the movements associated with the expression of spiritual gifts in the past has been their theological superficiality. This situation is now changing rapidly as numerous scholars contribute their work on the subject with the result that we are faced with a surfeit of literature and a variety of theological constructions. This paper is not intended as an answer to all the questions raised but as something of a re-assessment of the raw material of Scripture evidence.

1. The Ministry of the Spirit before Pentecost

In order to see the subject of spiritual gifts in true biblical perspective we must begin with the activity of the Spirit of God in the Old Testament.² Many scholars have been struck by what is, in the light of the New Testament revelation, the curiously impersonal presentation of the Spirit in the Old Testament. In fact one might almost understand the Spirit under the Old Covenant more in terms of Power than Person.³

Within the progressive revelation of the Old Testament there appear to be two lines of development:

(a) *In the experience of some, the Spirit meant special ability.* Particular people were equipped for particular tasks; enabled, that is, to accomplish things which were previously beyond their power.

The result varied from prophecy to physical strength; military prowess to royal wisdom;⁴ even including manual and artistic skill.⁵ A variety of terms is used for the reception or operation of this supernatural power. The Spirit is described as 'coming upon', 'taking possession of', 'filling', 'entering into', 'stirring', 'falling upon' (etc.) the persons concerned,⁶ after which they begin to fulfil tasks or exercise ministries which would otherwise have been beyond them. In this sense we may understand this enabling as 'charismatic', although the term *charisma* does not appear until the New Testament.

There are certain aspects of this ministry of the Spirit which might be difficult for us to appreciate in the light of our traditional dogmatic approach to Pneumatology: (i) These experiences did not necessarily make a man holy, nor were they infallible as a result of them.⁷ (ii) This gifting was selective and sometimes temporary. It was not the experience of all God's covenant people. It was confined to those called to particular duties, and even they had no guarantee of its permanence.⁸ (iii) Not all professedly 'charismatic' ministry in the Old Testament was of the Lord. There were, for example, false prophets as well as true ones.

(b) *In prophetic anticipation there was also the promise of life by the Spirit.* We know from the New Testament that the Old Covenant was both educational and anticipatory. Its very failure as a saving system coupled with the persistent disobedience of the covenant people proved to be the opportunity for further revelation concerning a new arrangement which would ultimately fulfil and replace the old. The prophets were given the vision of a New Covenant, connected with which was the promise of a new work of the Spirit. That new work was to prove a completely new basis for godly living; not by external observance of a written code, but by a new potential imparted to the individual.⁹

Along with this new ministry of the Spirit came the promise of an extension of the Old Covenant charismatic gifting to ordinary people of every status.¹⁰

Tied in with these future developments was the predicted coming of a Spirit-filled King who would inaugurate the new arrangement.¹¹ We may understand Jesus' ministry as being in direct line with Old Testament experience and in fulfilment of these prophecies. He himself claimed that it was so,¹² while his recorded ministry is evidence of a similar pattern to those under the old dispensation. It is significant that his public ministry did not commence until his baptism, accompanied as it was by the descent of the Holy Spirit,¹³ which we may be sure was no regenerating work. Although in itself an incomplete Christology, by this we may understand that the Son had apparently so limited himself to the conditions of human

life that he was in some way dependent upon the Spirit for power to sustain his work.

Jesus himself underlined and expanded upon the theme of a new work by the Holy Spirit¹⁴ in the context of a New Covenant before he ratified it with his blood. Now, however, the description is fully personal. Someone would come to the disciples in Christ's place, indwelling them, reminding them of his words, teaching them all truth as well as empowering them in their ministry to the world. Someone would, in fact, replace Christ for the disciples, being all that he had been to them and more, for whereas Jesus' earthly ministry had been localised and external, his would be universal and indwelling.

2. The Fulfilment of the Promise

Both aspects of the Spirit's work, anticipated or foretold in the Old Testament, find their fulfilment in the New Testament after Pentecost.

(a) His work was seen and understood in terms of regeneration and sanctification, those doctrines which we traditionally call the 'doctrines of grace', and that experience which we describe as 'union with Christ'.¹⁵ This assertion would be challenged by many, particularly those in the Reformed tradition, who maintain that the indwelling, regenerating work of the Spirit was nothing new, but had already been experienced under the Old Covenant.¹⁶ They would generally argue from the dogmatic assertion that faith is impossible without a creative work of the Spirit, and that Old Testament saints certainly exercised faith;¹⁷ from the spirituality of many passages in the Old Testament,¹⁸ and from the impossibility of entering the Kingdom without a regenerating work of the Spirit.¹⁹ The significance of Pentecost becomes for them that of the creation of a universal fellowship of believers over against the individual and national aspect of Old Covenant faith.²⁰

Whereas there is strength in these arguments, the prophetic nature of the Old Testament references to a new work by the Spirit, not to say the Gospel reiteration that the Spirit could not come to the disciples prior to Christ's ascension,²¹ point to some completely new arrangement from Pentecost onwards.²² While conscious of their indebtedness to the Old Covenant, New Testament writers describe the new arrangement in sharp contrast with the Old,²³ the contrast of letter and Spirit. If this were not the case, the Christian would be no better off in practical terms than the godly Old Covenant Jew.

(b) Peter was quick (and inspired!) to point out to the Pentecost crowds that the phenomena they were witnessing were the fulfilment of prophecy.²⁴ The Spirit's gifts were now available to all

God's people, irrespective of age or status, an offer which we see illustrated for us in the subsequent pages of the book of Acts and in the teaching on spiritual gifts in the Epistles.²⁵

While in no way disagreeing with the evidence of Scripture for extraordinary happenings in those early days, it has been traditional to explain that certain of these gifts were only applicable to the apostolic era, while the New Testament was being written and before the canon was closed. With the establishment of a Scriptural source of authority, the supernatural or extraordinary gifts were redundant and therefore withdrawn,¹⁶ as, it was held, the apostles themselves predicted.²⁶ As a result of this line of argument, any later claim to such gifts has been dismissed by many as being, by definition, not of God.

It is, of course, indisputable that God blessed and used the apostles and their contemporaries in remarkable and often spectacular ways. It is also historical fact that, apart from isolated and scattered incidents, often ambiguous, many of the gifts known in the New Testament era did disappear from the life of the Church, and have not been in evidence even in times of manifest blessing.²⁸

However, quite apart from the highly doubtful biblical exegesis which lies behind this view,²⁹ in positive terms, the New Testament authors do not appear to conceive of a church without all the gifts. In Paul's understanding, for example, they are linked with his description of the church as the body of Christ.³⁰ To ask if the gifts are for our generation is to ask if the church still answers to that description.³¹

Spiritual gifts are variously described in the Epistles. They can be *charismata* (sing. *charisma*), quite literally, gifts of grace, a word used in various ways, and not always specifically of spiritual gifts in the restricted sense;³² or *pneumatika*, literally, that which pertains to or is activated by the Spirit;³³ or in more general terms of gift, ministry, power, or manifestation.³⁴ As under the Old Covenant, they represent special ability to accomplish particular tasks and duties within the fellowship of the Church.³⁵ In traditional Pentecostal teaching, the supernatural gifts are nine in number,³⁶ but there are, in fact, several overlapping lists which range much wider.³⁷

It is significant that when there is a need for teaching about spiritual gifts, it is their wide variety which is emphasised.³⁸ Some were exciting (although it would be wrong to describe them as "ecstatic") such as speaking in tongues, which gave a new dimension to personal and corporate devotion;³⁹ prophecy, which brought a direct word from the Lord to a particular situation and which sometimes included prediction;⁴⁰ or healing, which, at times, accompanied the preaching of the Gospel as a demonstration of the power of

Christ.⁴¹ Other gifts are somewhat unexpected,⁴² and in places the gifts seem to shade off into what we might call graces.⁴³

Whatever the actual gifts, the apostles were clear that they had been given for the extension and edification of the Church.⁴⁴ They were tools to use and not toys to play with, a lesson which they had to learn the hard way even in New Testament times, for we have evidence that even then they were liable to abuse,⁴⁵ or to be held in contempt,⁴⁶ or even neglected.⁴⁷ It is also evident that not all ministry which claimed to be charismatic was necessarily of the Holy Spirit,⁴⁸ and perhaps more significantly, that spiritual gifts were not regarded by the apostles as the “be all and end all” of Christian experience.⁴⁹ It was possible to exercise the gifts of the Spirit without displaying his fruit (just as in this generation it is possible to have the fruit without the gifts).⁵⁰

The charismatic ministry of the Spirit was important but it was not all important; a truth, but not the whole truth. Above all the Spirit as portrayed in the New Testament was self-effacing, for the centre of New Testament faith and life was not the Spirit, but the Son.⁵¹ Those who possessed and exercise the gifts were called upon to display the evidence of spiritual maturity in their behaviour.⁵²

3. The Pentecostal Interpretation

Historically, when these spiritual gifts reappeared in the life of the Church at the beginning of the 20th Century, they were interpreted in a particular way, which we have come to know as Pentecostalism,⁵³ and the more recent resurgence of this emphasis which we know as the Charismatic movement,⁵⁴ has largely taken over and adopted this view. In this sense it would be fair to describe the movement as Neo-Pentecostalism, although its leaders dislike that description, and its links with traditional Pentecostals are often somewhat tenuous.

The general pattern of Pentecostal interpretation connects the gifts with a definite and generally post-conversion experience of the Holy Spirit, for many evidenced by speaking in tongues, and for some being the initiation into a new level of spirituality unknown previously. Technically this experience has been called variously (and ambiguously) “Baptism in the Holy Spirit”, “receiving the Spirit,” “being filled with the Spirit” or “the fulness of the Spirit,” and sometimes, “the second blessing.”⁵⁵

Such an interpretation must necessarily be divisive, for by definition it separates those who have come into this experience from those who have not, even though the latter may be mature Christians of many years standing. This has led to a host of pastoral problems within the Churches which many are at a loss to resolve. Some have even pressed the traditional Reformed understanding of

gifts to the point where they have dismissed, not only charismatic claims, but also the evidence of Scripture. Others have become extreme in a Pentecostal position which has written off God's work outside of a charismatic context. We must therefore examine the Pentecostal interpretation of Scripture to see if its foundations are as sure as its claims are confident.

There is no evidence in the New Testament that anyone could be truly regenerate without the indwelling ministry of the Spirit. While not ruling out the possibility of additional or subsequent gifting, the Spirit appears to commence his work at conversion. It is then that the believer "receives the Spirit."⁵⁶

The phrase "baptism in the Spirit" is somewhat ambiguous even in the New Testament. Used in the Gospels and Acts in connection with John the Baptist's prediction,⁵⁷ the six references appear to be linked to the historic outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, together with the manifestation of spiritual gifts at that time. Paul uses the phrase in the sense of what must mean regeneration,⁵⁸ which Pentecostals are often at pains to explain away. Many have understood the Gospels/Acts usage in terms of Paul and as meaning regeneration,⁵⁹ but it is possible that we have the same phrase used in two different ways.

Apart from one reference, all the cases of "being filled with the Spirit" are found in Luke's writings, where the phrase is used of both Jesus and the disciples.⁶⁰ In these references, it does often seem to have charismatic overtones, although we note that Luke was particularly fond of the metaphor of "filling",⁶¹ and that, in connection with the Spirit, he sees it as a repeatable experience.⁶² The exception, when Paul tells the Ephesians to be continually filled with the Spirit,⁶³ may well fall into another category altogether. Whereas it could be argued that for Luke the recipients of the filling are passive, for Paul the continuous filling of the Spirit in some way lies within their control. It may even be better to understand him as saying something of the nature of "Allow the Spirit to fill you by making room for him in your lives."⁶⁴ It is unlikely that this phrase, along with "baptism in the Holy Spirit," was ever intended as the technical expression it has ambiguously become.⁶⁵ Even some modern representatives of the charismatic movement recognise the ambiguity of the current terminology and wish to coin more meaningful terms.⁶⁶

The insistence upon tongues-speaking as a sign of charismatic experience rests upon very limited data in the book of Acts, and there it is always accompanied by other phenomena.⁶⁷ Paul clearly implies that not everyone had the gift of tongues,⁶⁸ and the plea that momentary tongues-speaking occurs at the time of the initial experience and not thereafter has no scriptural warrant at all.

It is impossible to be dogmatic about the order of saving experience from the book of Acts.⁶⁹ For some it is evident that there was a delay between believing the Gospel and receiving the Holy Spirit.⁷⁰ For others charismatic gifting was synchronous with conversion, even before baptism, while in other cases gifts are simply not mentioned.⁷¹ The case of the Ephesian disciples,⁷² long maintained as evidence for such a post-conversion experience, rests on a mistranslation in the Authorised Version, and adds little to the conclusion that it is impossible to find the Pentecostal pattern in the book of Acts. It is fairly obvious, also that whereas some gifts, like tongues, demand a particular and identifiable starting point in time, with others it is hardly likely to be so obvious.⁷³

With regard to the holiness teaching sometimes, though not always, attaching to Pentecostal doctrine, we may say that it is axiomatic that any experience of the Holy Spirit *should* lead the believer nearer to Christ. However, on the evidence of the New Testament, gifts did not guarantee spiritual advance.⁷⁴ The early reception of spiritual gifts at or soon after conversion, not to say their abuse, tells us that possessing and exercising them is not necessarily evidence of spiritual maturity.

In some respects both Pentecostal doctrine and the traditional Reformed approach suffer from a similar distortion in interpretation. The traditional position is largely a rationalisation of church history. It says, "The gifts have not occurred: therefore, they do not occur," and Scripture is tailored accordingly to this end. The Pentecostalist has done a similar thing with what is a genuine manifestation of the Spirit's ministry in our time. His interpretation is a rationalisation of individual experience, and again Scripture has to be trimmed to size.⁷⁵

The sad result is that the Church has been presented with two defective interpretations of spiritual gifts and called upon to choose between them, becoming charismatic or non-charismatic, Pentecostal or anti-Pentecostal. There is a growing body of opinion that these positions are not the only ones possible, that it is equally open to us to recognise the obvious validity of charismatic experience without necessarily embracing the traditional Pentecostal interpretation.

By analogy from the history of theological development through the last nineteen hundred years, we should expect fresh aspects of God's truth to surface in each generation. We should expect a period of misunderstanding, debate, and particularly, of definition as we learn from one another, and, please God, we should look for an advance in our understanding and appropriation of God's many coloured grace. The present turmoil in this area of theological debate need only be, in the providence of God, the growing pains of the Church.

NOTES

- 1 For full bibliographies on the debate see *A Theology of the Holy Spirit*, F. D. Bruner (London 1971); *The Pentecostals*, W. J. Hollenweger (London 1972); *I believe in the Holy Spirit*, M. Green (London 1975).
- 2 A survey of biblical references to the Holy Spirit in both Old and New Testaments will be found in *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, G. Smeaton r.p. (London 1958) and in *The Holy Spirit in the New Testament*, H. B. Swete (London 1931).
- 3 e.g. Num. 11: 16-17, 24-25. Cp. Green op. cit. p.30.
- 4 e.g. Deut. 34: 9; Judges 3: 10; 11: 29; 14: 19; 1 Sam. 10: 10; 16: 13; 2 Sam. 23: 2; Micah 3: 8 etc.
- 5 Ex. 31: 2-3. The relationship between what we call 'natural' ability and spiritual gift is left unexplored in Scripture. Of course, *all* abilities come from God. Cp. Green op. cit. p.156.
- 6 e.g. Judges 3: 10; 2 Chron. 14: 20; Micah 3: 8; Ez. 2: 2; Judges 13: 25 etc. Green op. cit. p. 19 calls the Spirit in the Old Testament 'the Invading Spirit.'
- 7 e.g. Samson; Saul (of whom A. Kuyper could say, 'Evidently the work of the Holy Spirit has nothing to do with regeneration'—*The Work of the Holy Spirit*: Grand Rapids 1946: p. 39).
- 8 e.g. I Sam. 16: 14. David's *cri de coeur* (Ps. 51: 11) is probably to be understood in this context. He had the precedent of Saul.
- 9 Ez. 11: 19-20; 36: 25-27; 37: 14; Is. 33: 14-17; 44: 3; 295: 19, 21; Zech. 12: 10 Cp. Jer. 31: 31-34. L. Morris (*Spirit of the Living God*: London 1960: p. 28.) 'The Old Testament. . .points us forward to a coming day, a day when the Messiah should appear, a day when the Spirit should be poured out upon all (and not restricted to one class of people like prophets), a day when men should know complete renewal of their inner life by the divine power that should be given to them.'
- 10 Joel 2: 28-29. Cp. Num. 11: 39.
- 11 Is. 11: 1-2; 42: 1; 48: 16; 61: 1.
- 12 Luke 4: 16-21.
- 13 e.g. Luke 3: 21-22. Cp. 4: 14.
- 14 See especially John chaps. 14-16.
- 15 The title 'Holy Spirit' is rare in the Old Testament. Cp. Swete op. cit. p. 340 'With one or two possible exceptions the Old Testament makes no reference to the ethical action of the Spirit of God on the individual man.'
- 16 B. B. Warfield, *Biblical and Theological Studies* (Philadelphia 1952) p. 151: 'The Spirit of God in the Old Testament performs all the functions which are ascribed to the Holy Ghost of the New Testament, and bears all the same characteristics.'
- 17 Kuyper op. cit. p. 119 argues that as believers are saved they must therefore 'have received saving grace'. . . 'the inward gift of regeneration.'
- 18 So Smeaton re. the Psalms op. cit. p. 26.
- 19 Some cite John 3: 10 in this context
- 20 Cp. Kuyper op. cit. pp. 119-120: 'The spiritual union of the elect did not exist among Israel.' The Church as the Body of Christ could exist only after Christ's exaltation.
- 21 John 14: 16-17 (though note var. lect. in Greek text); 15: 26; 16: 7; Cp. John 7: 37-39.

- 22 Swete op. cit. p. 151 ‘“It dwells with you” describes the experience which was just about to end; “It shall be in you” that which was about to begin.’ Cp. R. Pache *The Person and Work of the Holy Spirit* (Chicago 1960) pp. 31, 55.
- 23 e.g. 2 Cor. 3. Cp. Matt. 11: 11. Green op. cit. p. 150: ‘Great though John the Baptist was, he pointed forward to the Kingdom but was not a member of it, and did not enjoy the distinctive blessing of the Kingdom, the presence of the Spirit of Jesus within him’. Cp. Swete op. cit. pp. 21-22.
Smeaton (op. cit. pp. 65-7) while admitting that the New Covenant was ‘an essentially different economy’ . . . ‘the former left men without the quickening Spirit for the Spirit of life was not dispensed in that economy’, then takes refuge in the Abrahamic Covenant and goes on to say that there were countless numbers of regenerate men under the old economy, not because of Sinai but because of their faith in the promise of Christ.
- 24 Acts 2. 16ff.
- 25 Some have argued that the anarthrous use of the term *pneuma* indicates his charismatic activity. See Swete op. cit. p. 395ff for references and discussion.
- 26 Smeaton op. cit. p. 51: ‘The supernatural and extraordinary gifts were temporary and intended to disappear when the Church should be founded and the inspired canon of Scripture closed.’ Cp. Kuyper op. cit. 187-189.
- 27 The Scriptures usually cited are 1 Cor. 13: 8; Heb. 2: 3-4.
- 28 M. Harper *As at the Beginning* (London 1965) considerably overdraws the picture.
- 29 i.e. 1 Cor. 13: 8 more naturally refers to Heaven; Heb. 2: 3-4 whilst recognising the remarkable activity of the Spirit at the beginning, in no way denies a continuing manifestation.
- 30 e.g. 1 Cor. 12; Romans 12: 3-8; Eph. 4: 7-16.
- 31 Green op. cit. pp. 172, 197 cites the prevalence of spiritual gifts in the sub-Apostolic days.
- 32 e.g. Rom. 5: 15; 6: 23; 2 Cor. 1: 11. Green op. cit. p. 196: ‘To be a Christian is to be a charismatic.’
- 33 e.g. 1 Cor. 12: 1.
- 34 Eph. 4: 7; Cor. 12: 4-7.
- 35 Kuyper op. cit. p. 194: ‘the divinely ordained means and powers whereby the King enables the Church to perform its task in the world.’
- 36 From 1 Cor. 12: 8-11.
- 37 1 Cor. 12: 28-30; 13: 1-3; Rom. 12: 6-8; Eph. 4: 11. Cp. Green op. cit. pp. 192f.
- 38 1 Cor. 12: 4-26.
- 39 e.g. 1 Cor. 14: 1-32.
- 40 e.g. Acts 11: 27-30.
- 41 e.g. Acts 3; 14: 8ff (though as the last reference indicates, not always with the desired effect). Cp. Rom. 15: 18-19; Heb. 2: 3-4.
- 42 1 Cor. 7: 7. (celibacy); 1 Cor. 12: 28 (helpers).
- 43 e.g. 1 Cor. 13: 1-3; Rom. 12: 6-8; 1 Peter 4: 10-11.
- 44 e.g. 1 Cor. 14. and the use of Tongues (especially vv. 6-12, 18-19).
- 45 1 Cor. 12-14.

- 46 1 Thess. 5: 19-20.
- 47 1 Tim. 4: 14; 2 Tim. 1: 7.
- 48 Mt. 7: 15-23; 1 Thess. 5: 21; 1 Jn. 4: 1; 1 Cor. 14: 29, 37-38. (possibly also the background of 1 Cor. 12: 2-3) Cp. 2. Thess. 2: 9.
- 49 e.g. 1 Cor. 13: 1-3.
- 50 Smeaton op. cit. p. 85 explains Heb. 6: 4; 10: 29; as 'instances of men receiving only the supernatural gifts, not true grace.'
- 51 e.g. Jn. 16: 14 Cp. 2 Cor 3: 17-18.
- 52 e.g. Mt. 7: 15-20.
- 53 For a description of Pentecostalism and its doctrines see Hollenweger op. cit.
- 54 Harper op. cit. For a description of the Movement: *The Charismatic Movement* ed. M.P. Hamilton (Grand Rapids 1975).
- 55 See Bruner op. cit. pp. 56-148; Hollenweger op. cit. pp. 291-512 for Pentecostal doctrine.
- 56 e.g. Rom. 8: 9-11 Cp. Gal. 3: 1-5, 14. Green op. cit. p. 216 (agreeing with J. D. Dunn *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*) stresses that Christian initiation involves Repentance and Faith, Water Baptism, and the Receipt of the Spirit.
- 57 Matt. 3: 11; Mark 1: 8; Luke 3: 16; John 1: 33; Acts 1: 5; 11: 15-16.
- 58 1 Cor 12: 13.
- 59 Green op. cit. p. 140.
- 60 e.g. Luke 4: 1; Acts 2: 4; etc.
- 61 Green op. cit. p. 148 for frequency. He concludes that Luke uses the idea in two ways: either of the general character of a man (e.g. Luke 5: 12; 13: 10) or of the sudden inspiration of the moment, sometimes charismatic, sometimes not.
- 62 e.g. Acts 4: 31 (a group which had previously been 'filled').
- 63 Eph. 5: 18
- 64 Cp. Col. 3: 16 (the corresponding reference in the 'parallel' letter).
- 65 If taken literally the metaphors do not correspond. To baptise someone is not to fill them!
- 66 See *Renewal Magazine* April 1975: *Renewal Study Section 1* (iii-iv).
- 67 Acts 2: 4; 10: 46; 19: 6.
- 68 1 Cor. 12: 30.
- 69 John 14-16 are silent on the matter of a second experience, as are the Epistles
- 70 e.g. Acts 8: 14-17
- 71 e.g. Acts 10: 44-46.
- 72 Acts 19: 2. AV 'since ye believed'. (Bruner op. cit. p. 208).
- 73 e.g. 'helpers, administrators' (1 Cor. 12: 28).
- 74 See the Corinthian situation.
- 75 Kuyper op. cit. p. 4f: 'Spiritual experience can furnish no basis for instruction.'