



feeding...gathering...carrying...leading. (Isiah 40:11)

Dearest family,

First of all, let me say how encouraged I have been by the number of you who have responded to me about Sunday's message. That tells me the Lord is doing something and there is a timeliness to all this. I focused on Paul's word to the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 5:19-20) not to quench the Spirit's fire or hold prophecies in contempt. I asked you to discuss three questions among yourselves at different junctures in the message: *What are the possible arguments for or against, running a church service in a very controlled, platform-dominated manner? In a context where there is an openness to the expression of spiritual gifts, to every member ministry, what does that require of leadership and what gifting's and qualities do they need to encourage and oversee this in a community? When Paul admonishes us to test the spirits, what kind of tests do you think should be applied?* You may want to re-visit these in home-group this week, having now heard the message. If you were not present on Sunday, given the important pastoral and directional nature of the message, I would urge you to try and download it and give it a hearing, as I cannot cover the small-print of all the points in this letter.

I began by suggesting some ways that the Spirit can be quenched in public services: control, culture, consensus, concern, criticism, contempt, confusion. Some of the qualities that an openness to the public expression of the gifts required of leadership included: spiritual security, humility (not threatened by others' gifts), submission to the Holy Spirit, discernment, courage and boldness, fear of God more than people, trust, knowledge of the Word, a strong pastoral heart. There are two issues here:

Do not quench what is allowable, desirable, normal and genuine: This is easier said than done. There are challenges in making room for the Spirit. It requires walking by faith, relinquishing control. But this does not pre-empt the need for godly order, sensitive pastoral leadership and co-operative congregational discipline. Paul's teaching to the Corinthians (12-14) on spiritual gifts is clear. They are not all vested in one person, or even a few: *"all men...to one...to another...not made up of one part but many... everyone has..."* But there are some criteria for expression and exercise of these gifts.

- **Order:** "one at a time...God is not a God of disorder but peace...Everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way..." (14:27, 33, 40) Sometimes zeal and enthusiasm can quench the Spirit's intentions as effectively as laziness and neglect.
- **Intelligibility:** *"I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others..."* In other words, there is an appropriate sensitivity to context, and Paul is aware of what is best if unbelievers are present. (This may make for a greater freedom of gifts in some contexts than others e.g. in home-groups where all are believers.)
- **Discernment:** *"weigh carefully what is said...the spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets..."* (14:29, 32)

Paul's particular concern here is the loss of the prophetic, either because prophets refuse to speak, or prophets are being refused to speak. Paul told the Corinthians he wanted everyone to prophesy, and they should especially desire the gift of prophecy. If prophecy brings comfort, exhortation and edification to the church who would not want it? Why would you diminish it or extinguish it? It is anti-discipleship and anti-church growth.

Do not allow what is false or fleshly: There is a big difference between something that is wrong and something that is immature. Releasing and encouraging the immature takes as much pastoral gifting as discerning and dealing with what is false and fleshly. Sometimes a contribution may not be wrong by truth tests but still inappropriate, in timing or in connection with what the Lord is doing or saying. Godly testing, evaluating, discerning is necessary in order to hold on to the good and hold off on the bad. The purpose of this is to loose not limit; to nurture not neglect; to excel not expel; to be loving not legalistic; to be constructive not critical; to encourage not judge; to include not exclude. There is a holy balance between testing and trusting: leaders trusting the congregation's gifts, congregation's trusting the leaders' discernment, leaders and congregations testing together. So what is the testing? Paul doesn't go into any details here but we are not without instruction on this.

I summarized some possible tests as follows:

1. The test of faithfulness

- **To the person of Jesus:** *“Test the spirits...this is how...every spirit that recognizes that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.”* (1 Jn. 4:1-3) *“No one can say Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit.”* (1 Cor. 12:3) It’s all about personal relationship with Jesus as Lord. Who is in charge? Who gets the glory?
- **To the grace of the gospel:** *“Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned.”* (Gal. 1:8) Is what is said in accord with the *“once for all”* faith that was entrusted to the saints. (Jude v3)
- **To the truth of scripture:** *“The Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.”* (Acts 17:11) It is interesting that there was possibly a foundational issue for the Thessalonians that was discerned right at the beginning and that had not matured, that had made them vulnerable. There was a lot of unexamined teaching out there. As always it was based more on opinions, hunches, and intuitions.

2. The test of fruitfulness

- **The character and conduct of a person:** *“Watch out for false prophets...by their fruit you will recognize them...they come in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ferocious wolves.”* (Mt. 7:15) In Jn. 10 Jesus gives a whole sermon on this matter, and teaches us to check the messenger, check the message, check the motives (how about money, glory, influence, power, vanity) and check the means and the methods. The fruits of the Spirit give a fair assessment of character and conduct. *“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”* (Gal. 5:22-23) There will be no spotlight on the speaker, either through self-promotion or adulation of others. The true response to what is true will be, in Paul’s words, *“God is really among you!”* (1 Cor. 14:25) not, what a great prophet or speaker you had there. Who are you most conscious of? Is it about the self-consciousness of the speaker or about a God-consciousness? Who gets the glory?
- **The evidence of the fruit of edification:** *“Everyone who prophesies speaks for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort...he who prophesies edifies the church... all of these must be done for the strengthening of the church... so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged.”* (1 Cor. 14:3, 26, 31) Paul gives a similar test in Eph. 4:29, an ABC: is it appropriate, is it beneficial, is it constructive. Does it build up, encourage, comfort or does it condemn, bring fear or confusion.
- **Submission to leadership and congregation:** Gifts of leadership, gifts of the Spirit only have meaning in so far as they serve the community, not the leader or the gift bearer. Where there is that spirit of submission, there will be humility, and an openness to testing and instruction and correction if necessary. One of the fruits will be peace in and acceptance by the congregation. There is a corporate apprehension of truth not just by the leaders.

So is it possible for the Spirit to be quenched in public services? Yes. Who can be responsible? All of us!

I am giving you a fresh call to a corporate agreement, all of us, everyone, regardless of our roles and responsibilities, that we will not despise the freedom for the exercise of spiritual gifts and not take for granted what is made available to us in this community. If you don’t use it you will lose it. It is not about the presence of Gifts but the presence of God. There are two basic ways to quench a fire:

1. **Do something:** extinguish it (the spiritual version of water, chemicals, blankets) Smother it, stifle it, douse it.
2. **Do nothing:** *“Where there is no fuel the fire goes out.”* (Pvb. 26:20) Neglect, laziness, failure to tend and feed it. Calvin wrote: *“People are guilty of quenching the Spirit when instead of fanning the flames of their spiritual life more and more as they should, they make God’s gifts void through neglect.”*

Usually with most people it is never an either/or but a both/and.

As a church, we determine that we are going to fuel the fire, not quench it. We determine that we are going to grace not grieve the Spirit. Let Jesus have the last word. You know the story of the 5 wise and 5 foolish virgins. The key point was that the bridegroom seemed a long time in coming, so half of them let their fire go out. Interestingly enough, it is in the context of talking about the return of Christ, the bridegroom, that Paul gives his injunction not to quench the Spirit’s fire. The message of Jesus is the spark for that of Paul. *“Look to your jars!”* Feed the flames. It’s all about living a ‘ready’ life – ready for when the master comes.

- *“Never be lacking in zeal but keep your spiritual fervor (boiling heat) serving the Lord.”* (Rom. 12:11)
- *“Fan into flame the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of hands.”* (2 Tim. 1:6)

In our personal lives, let us not grieve the Spirit. In our corporate life and gatherings, let us not quench the Spirit.

Pastorally yours,
Stuart