

Do Not Quench the Spirit

By Patrick Swayne

Paul knew firsthand the pain that could be afflicted by the hands of others. His sufferings and trials, recorded in part in 2 Corinthians 11:23-28, were among the greatest endured by any soldier of the cross. Knowing what men were capable of doing gave Paul an insight that few had. Paul not only knew of the danger of the oppressor, but of the danger facing the oppressed to lose faith and cease to follow Christ. He saw this happen on several occasions, as those he held dear both left him and left the faith (2 Timothy 1:15; 4:10). Even Timothy, Paul's favored son in the faith (1 Timothy 1:2) was at one time in the danger of being "ashamed of the testimony of our Lord" (2 Timothy 1:8). Knowing the danger of oppression and the temptations of being oppressed, Paul begged the Thessalonians, "Do not quench the Spirit" (1 Thessalonians 5:19).

What does it mean to quench the Spirit? To quench means to extinguish, like what happens when a fire is put out. While the text gives no commentary as to how the Thessalonians could do this or why they would want to in the first place, one possible explanation can be drawn by considering the unique situation of first century Christians and the situation of Thessalonians in particular.

In Paul's day, the word of God was given and confirmed through miraculous gifts, a system of parts which would eventually be replaced by the written and complete New Testament (1 Corinthians 13:9-12). Of course, using these spiritual gifts would be an obvious mark to anyone in that day that the messenger was from God: as Nicodemus said to Christ, "no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him" (John 3:2). However, that mark could work in two ways – to confirm the word to those seeking the truth, and to condemn the one using the gift to those who hated the truth.

As I stated last week, the Thessalonians underwent severe persecution from the moment they obeyed the gospel. There would be a great temptation for them to stop using their miraculous gifts, which had been endowed to them through the apostle Paul by the Holy Spirit: "For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance" (1 Thessalonians 1:5). We know such a temptation existed, because Timothy had to be encouraged by Paul to continue to exercise his gift (2 Timothy 1:6).

If the Thessalonians stopped using their miraculous gifts, they would be quenching not only the ability to confirm the word but the word itself – the gifts of the Spirit included miraculous wisdom, knowledge and prophecy (1 Corinthians 12:8-10). Prior to the completion of the New Testament, these three spiritual gifts served as the functional equivalent to the written New Testament. Without these gifts, the Thessalonians would depart from the faith.

Christians today cannot quench the Spirit in the sense of ceasing to use a miraculous gift, as miraculous gifts ceased when the last person who was given the gift of the Holy Spirit by an apostle died (cf. Acts 8:14-19). However, Christians today can still quench the Spirit in another way: by turning their backs on the Word, which today is the Spirit's sword and means of operation among mankind (Ephesians 6:17). Christians who turn their back on church services and personal study of the Bible are quenching the Spirit in their lives – by not allowing the Spirit to work in and through them. Not only will they quench the Spirit

in their lives, but their actions, no longer directed by God's word, will serve to quench the Spirit in the lives of others whom they could have led to God.

If the sword of the Spirit, the Bible, remains sheathed, then the power of God unto salvation will remain inaccessible to all who are lost (Romans 1:16). Each person has the God given duty to love the truth (2 Thessalonians 2:8-10), to study the truth (2 Timothy 2:15), and to obey the truth with all of his heart (John 14:15). If one does not do this and instead quenches the Spirit, he will fall under the condemnation of the Spirit he ignored: "He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him—the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day" (John 12:48). May we always apply ourselves to a diligent study of God's word, and never quench the Spirit.