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CHAPTER

1

God's Eternal Work: Only by His Spirit

... he ... gave gifts unto men. ... he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ. (Ephesians 4:8, 11-12)

The biblical teaching that God's work through the church can be accomplished only by the energizing of the Holy Spirit is very hard for us humans to accept. It is a fact that frustrates our carnal desire for honor and praise, for glory and recognition.

Basically, God has been very kind and tender toward us. But there is no way in which He can compromise with our human pride and carnality. That

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is why His Word bears down so hard on “proud flesh,” insisting that we understand and confess that no human gifts, no human talents can accomplish the ultimate and eternal work of God.

Even though God faithfully reminds us that a ministry of the Holy Spirit is to hide the Christian worker in the work, the true humility He seeks among us is still too often the exception and not the rule. We might as well confess that many have been converted to Christ and have come into the church without renouncing that human desire for honor and praise. As a result, some have actually spent lifetimes in religious work doing little more than getting glory for themselves.

But the glory can belong only to God. If we take the glory, God is being frustrated in the church.

With that background in mind, consider what Jesus Christ actually did. He gave special gifts in order “for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ” (4:12). The ministry that the saints are to do—and the reference is not just to ordained ministers as we know them—will bring about the building up of the Body of Christ “till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ” (4:13).

Some things are missing

It is rather common for visitors to my church to ask me about some of the things they do not find there. They want to know why my church frowns

on some customs found in other contemporary groups. I try very hard to keep from drawing uncomplimentary comparisons with other churches. If other churches fail to meet the high spiritual standards God has set in His Word, they must answer to the Lord of the church. I am responsible before God for the conduct of the work He has given me to do.

I have prayerfully studied the Scriptures to determine how I can fit into God's program for accomplishing His eternal work. I find three basic requirements God makes of the Body of Christ if it is to do His final work—His eternal work.

First, Christian believers and Christian congregations must be thoroughly consecrated to Christ's glory alone. This means absolutely turning their backs on the contemporary insistence on human glory and recognition. I have done everything I can to keep "performers" out of my pulpit. I was not called to recognize "performers." I am confident our Lord never meant for the Christian church to provide a kind of religious stage where performers proudly take their bows, seeking personal recognition. That is not God's way to an eternal work. He has never indicated that proclamation of the gospel is to be dependent on human performances.

Instead, it is important to note how much the Bible has to say about the common people—the plain people. The Word of God speaks with such appreciation of the common people that I am inclined to believe they are especially dear to Him. Jesus was always surrounded by the common people. He had a few "stars," but largely His helpers were from the

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common people—the good people and, surely, not always the most brilliant.

Jesus looked first for consecration. In our own day it is certainly true that the Spirit of God uses those who are no longer interested in their own promotion but are dedicated to one thought: getting glory for Jesus Christ, who is Savior and Lord.

We are simply God's instruments

To please God, a person must be just an instrument for God to use. For a few seconds, picture in your mind the variety of wonderful and useful appliances we have in our homes. They have been engineered and built to perform tasks of all kinds. But without the inflow of electrical power they are just lumps of metal and plastic, unable to function and serve. They cannot do their work until power is applied from a dynamic outside source.

So it is in the work of God in the church. Many people preach and teach. Many take part in the music. Certain ones try to administer God's work. But if the power of God's Spirit does not have freedom to energize all they do, these workers might just as well stay home.

Natural gifts are not enough in God's work. The mighty Spirit of God must have freedom to animate and quicken with His overtones of creativity and blessing.

There have been in the past great preachers who were in demand all over the world. I think of one—a contemporary—a recognized divine in New England. He was not known primarily as a

Bible preacher. He expounded on such subjects as nature and science, literature and philosophy. His books had instant sales and his pulpit oratory attracted great crowds. But when he died, the bottom just dropped out of all the work that had kept him so busy. He had given no place to the Spirit of God to direct all of that natural talent and energy. God's eternal work had not been furthered.

We may recall, however, that when Charles H. Spurgeon and G. Campbell Morgan passed away, their work and outreach went right on. Both of these well-known preachers had built their lifetime ministries on the Word of God and the power of the Spirit.

You can write it down as a fact: No matter what a man does, no matter how successful he seems to be in any field, if the Holy Spirit is not the chief Energizer of his activity, it will all fall apart when he dies.

Perhaps the saddest part about all this is that the man may be honored at his death for his talents and abilities, but he will learn the truth in that great day when our Lord judges the work of every person. That which is solely his own work, accomplished by his own talent, will be recognized as nothing but wood, hay and straw.

The importance of prayer

A second important requirement if the believing church is to be used in God's ministry is prayer and the response God makes to our prayers uttered in true faith. This matter of prayer

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really bears on the great privileges of the common people, the children of God. No matter what our stature or status, we have the authority in the family of God to pray the prayer of faith. The prayer of faith engages the heart of God, meeting God's conditions of spiritual life and victory.

Our consideration of the power and efficacy of prayer enters into the question of why we are part of a Christian congregation and what that congregation is striving to be and do. We have to consider whether we are just going around and around—like a religious merry-go-round. Are we simply holding on to the painted mane of the painted horse, repeating a trip of very insignificant circles to a pleasing musical accompaniment?

Some may think the path of the religious carousel is a kind of progress, but the family of God knows better. We are among those who believe in something more than holding religious services in the same old weekly groove. We believe that in an assembly of redeemed believers there should be marvelous answers to prayer.

We believe that God hears and actually answers our praying in the Spirit. One miraculous answer to prayer within a congregation will do more to lift, encourage and solidify the people of God than almost any other thing. Answers to our prayers will lift up the hands that hang down in discouragement and strengthen the feeble spiritual knees.

All of the advertising we can do will never equal the interest and participation in the things

of God resulting from the gracious answers to the prayers of faith generated by the Holy Spirit.

Actually, it will be such prayer and the meeting of God's conditions that bring us to the third requirement if God is to fulfill His ordained accomplishments through the church. I speak of the Christian's dependence on the Holy Spirit and our willingness to exercise the Spirit's gifts.

An overflowing subject

This is an overflowing subject, one not easily exhausted, leading us into a consideration of the presence, power and blessings of God available only through the ministry of the Spirit. There are very few perceptive Christians who will argue with the fact that the gentle presence of the divine Spirit is always necessary if we are to see revival wonders.

I still have in my files an old sermon outline on revival in the church. I preached on revival when I was young. I soon found out it was easy to preach revival sermons but very difficult to make them come to life in the church.

What do I mean by "revival wonders"? Well, you will find such wonders among the people of God when someone in the congregation steps out into a new and wonderful spiritual experience. Just let that happen to one young person and it will do more to cause the youth work to lift above the sandbar than a host of scheduled meetings and special conferences. The same is certainly true for older Christians. Just let one person step

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out in faith, claiming the fullness of the Spirit, crowning Jesus Christ as Lord, and the spiritual fallout will be felt by the entire group of believers.

We have to accept this as a spiritual principle, according to God's promises concerning the Holy Spirit. Such spiritual blessings cannot be bought. A true work of revival cannot be brought in by airplane or by freightliner. God's presence and blessing cannot be humanly induced.

Such revival wonders can take place only as the Holy Spirit energizes the Word of God as it is preached. Genuine blessings cannot come unless the Holy Spirit energizes, convinces and stirs the people of God.

Now, what does this all add up to? If we are intent upon God's glory alone, if we are using the resources of prayer and if we are obedient to the Spirit of God, there assuredly will be an attitude of true joyfulness in Christ's church. Those who know me probably do not think of me as an overwhelmingly cheerful man. But, thank God, I know about the true joy of the Lord and I believe we should be a joyful people.

All of us who are members of the Body of Christ must face up to the question of whether or not we actually fit the description of "a joyful people." How many of us bring family and domestic problems right along with us, in thought and disposition, when we come to worship! How many business people bring their weekday troubles home on Friday nights and carry them along to church on Sunday!

We are children of the King

And what about the family's health? The worries about the children? How many of us continue to lug these problems and worries around on a full-time basis! We ought not to do it and we cannot be a joyful people if we do. Why should the children of the King go mourning all the day? Why should the children of the King hang their heads and tote their own burdens?

We are missing the mark about Christian victory and the life of joy in our Savior. We ought to be standing straight and praising our God!

I must agree with the psalmist that the joy of the Lord is the strength of His people. I do believe that the sad world is attracted to spiritual sunshine—the genuine thing, that is.

Some churches train their greeters and ushers to smile, showing as many teeth as possible. But I can sense that kind of display, and when I am greeted by a person who is smiling because he or she has been trained to smile, I know I am shaking the flipper of a trained seal. When the warmth and joy of the Holy Spirit are in a congregation, however, and the folks are spontaneously joyful, the result is a wonderful influence upon others.

I have said it a hundred times: The reason we have to search for so many things to cheer us up is the fact that we are not really joyful and contentedly happy within. I admit that we live in a gloomy world and that international affairs, nuclear threats, earthquakes and riots cause people to shake their heads in despair and say, "What's

the use?" But we are Christians, and Christians have every right to be the happiest people in the world. We do not have to look to other sources. We look to the Word of God and discover how we can know the faithful God above and draw upon His resources.

Another promise of God is that the Holy Spirit with His gifts and graces will also give us genuine love for one another. I am determined that I am going to love everybody, even if it kills me! I have set my heart on it. I am going to do it.

Some people do not like me—and they have said so. But I am going to love them, and they are not going to be able to stop me.

Love is not just feelings. Love is *willing*. You can will to love people. The Lord says to me, "Love people!" I know very well that He does not mean just to feel love for them. He means that I should will to love them.

What about sympathy and compassion?

It would be shortsighted to mention the blessed things the Holy Spirit wants to do in the midst of God's people and not add sympathy and compassion to the list. I dare to trust that you are sympathetic toward your fellow Christians. I hope that never do you hear of a fellow Christian being in trouble or experiencing trials without feeling concern, without suffering over it and taking the matter to God in prayer.

This kind of concern for one another comes out of love and understanding. If we have this grace

by God's Spirit, we will take no superior attitudes, we will not be censorious of others. If the Lord should take His hand from under us, we would plunge down and be gone forever. We need to be keenly aware of that. I thank God for His goodness which He continues to reveal to us in spite of our many weaknesses and faults.

It is in this context that I recall a conversation with a devoted English brother, Noel Palmer—a tall, expressive Salvation Army officer with a great voice. "Brother Palmer," I said to him, "what about sanctification in the heart? What does it mean to you?"

His response was quick. "I believe that if the heart loves God and wants to do right, God will overlook a lot of flaws—and He will give us light as we walk with Him."

I say with Noel Palmer, thank God you do not have to be flawless to be blessed! You need to have a big heart that wants the will of God more than anything else in the world. You need also to have an eye single to His glory.

These are the things that matter: exercising the gifts of God's Spirit by the energy of the Spirit. These are the things that must be important to us in our congregations. They all add up to the fact that the Holy Spirit is making Jesus Christ our chief joy and delight!