

# XIV *Quenching the Holy Spirit*

*Do not put out the Spirit's fire;  
do not treat prophecies with contempt.  
Test everything. Hold on to the good.*

(1 THESSALONIANS 5:19-21)

In the previous chapter we considered the apostolic admonition contained in the letter to the Ephesians (5:30) about not grieving the Holy Spirit. We learned that the Holy Spirit can indeed be grieved. Our God is not an unaffected, emotionless God, but he has personal feelings that can be deeply wounded.

We also saw that this grieving of the Spirit is not to be equated with the unpardonable sin against the Holy Spirit. Grieving the Spirit is done by believers, by Christians who are not watchful but careless and so incur God's wrath and censure. We all have times in our life when we grieve the Holy Spirit and cause much distress for ourselves.

## **Quenching the Spirit?**

In this section we look at a related text, which is often quoted in combination with the one discussed earlier “do not *quench* the Holy Spirit.” Here we might raise an eyebrow. Is it not surprising that the Bible speaks of *quenching* the Spirit? Grieving the Spirit is one thing, but is it really possible to quench the Holy Spirit?

How can anyone quench God? Which human being has the ability to quench the Holy Spirit of whom we also confess that he is sovereign, almighty, and invincible? The very idea that the Spirit can be “put out,” as it were, does not fit with our understanding of insuperable grace. Is it not an Arminian thought that a person can quench the Holy Spirit? Arminian theology teaches that human beings have the freedom (and so the power) either to give in to the Spirit or to block him out.

Of course, strictly speaking, no one can quench the Holy Spirit as a person in the Holy Trinity. God remains at all times sovereign and almighty. This must be kept in mind for a proper understanding of the text. But that is not the point of our present exercise.

Paul is also not speaking of the hidden, *inward* working of the Spirit in our hearts; the supernatural, mysterious, inexpressible work of regeneration or conversion, as the Canons of Dort formulate it (III/IV, Art. 12). He is not saying at all that we have in ourselves the power definitively to resist the Holy Spirit and that God's grace can be overcome by our sins.

### ***The public work of the Holy Spirit***

Paul is speaking of something different in this passage. He is referring to the *public* work of the Holy Spirit *in the congregation*, especially in the worship services. This is what we learn when we examine this text in its context. We discover that the apostle warns the church not to quench the Spirit. We also learn how the activity of the Holy Spirit is quenched in the congregation and how this activity is fostered in the congregation.

The apostle Paul is speaking in this chapter about the manner in which the congregation is encouraged and edified. See verse 11: Therefore, encourage one another and build one another up. There is within the congregation the calling to all the members to encourage and edify. This belongs to the office of all believers.

At the same time we note that in the verses 12 to 15 the apostle in connection with this edification mentions especially the work of the office bearers. The office bearers are to be received by the congregation and esteemed highly in love because of their work (verse 13). It is particularly the task of the office bearers to work for the edification of the church. Are they not Christ's gift to the congregation, as Paul writes in Ephesians 4, and instruments of the Holy Spirit?

The focus of all this is the life and demeanour of the congregation. In the verses 16 to 22, the apostle zeroes in on the worship services. He speaks of rejoicing, prayer, thanksgiving, and prophesying, and these are typically matters which take place in the worship services of the church. In these services the congregation is encouraged and built up in the faith.

### ***A very specific admonition***

In this context of congregational life and worship the apostle warns against the quenching of the Holy Spirit. This is not an isolated admonition

for each and every situation, but a very specific admonition which applies particularly to the gathering of the congregation in worship to praise God and to hear his Word.

This makes clear that the quenching of the Spirit first of all has to do with our attendance of and attitude in the worship services of the church. Notice how the apostle immediately connects the quenching of the Holy Spirit with the despising of prophesy. It is clear that this prophesying was done mainly in the worship services. The issue at stake is, then, that the quenching of the Holy Spirit happens when people despise prophecy, the Word of God, wherever is publicly and properly proclaimed.

### ***A manner of speaking: putting out the fire***

We recognize that the apostle Paul uses the word “quenching” in a figurative sense. One cannot literally quench the Spirit. But in a manner of speaking, you can. Most likely the verb “to quench” is chosen in connection with the fact that the Holy Spirit is often associated with fire.

Let me give you a few examples. John the Baptist prophesied of Jesus as follows: “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (Matt 3:11). On the day of Pentecost, when the Spirit is poured out, there appeared tongues as of fire (Acts 2:3). So also Paul can use another interesting way of speaking (in his letter to the Romans): be *aglow* with the Spirit. The Holy Spirit in a manner of speaking sets us on fire and makes us glow like burning embers or shining lamps.

Now the point in this text is: just as you can quench a fire, so you can also quench the Spirit. This does not mean that we have the ability to expel the Holy Spirit completely. But we certainly can resist him and severely hinder the progress of his work.

### ***How does one put out a fire?***

I asked myself the question in how many different ways one can put out a fire. I came to the conclusion that there are really only two effective ways.

One method is to take away the fuel supply. It says in Proverbs: by lack of wood the fire goes out (26:20). If we cut the fuel line between God and us, we are no longer burning with zeal and aglow in the Spirit. To put it concretely, the fire goes out if we do not diligently use the *means of grace*.

The other method is to extinguish the fire by outward means. Throw water on it, smother it with a blanket or cast a shovel full of dirt on it, and

the fire goes out. The fire of faith goes out if we persist in wilful sin, and in doing so despise the Word of God.

We do not know how serious the matter was among the Thessalonians. Paul would not have warned if there was no real danger. It seems clear that there were those who *despised prophesying*, and by doing so quenched the Holy Spirit. Such people render the work of the Spirit unfruitful in their own lives and perhaps in that of others.

### ***Despising prophecy***

They do this, as it says literally, by regarding prophesying as nothing. To despise means to put aside as worthless. Apparently that was the attitude of some members of the congregation. They did nothing but criticise prophecy and downgrade prophets. They did so most likely because they did not like the contents of the prophecy and wanted to continue in a wicked lifestyle.

We know from 1 Corinthians that prophesying was one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Prophesying at that time was either the giving of new revelation or a clear interpretation of what had already been revealed. By this prophesying the Holy Spirit himself led the church further into the riches of the truth. When we keep this in mind, we understand the close connection between the commands: do not quench the Spirit, and do not despise prophesying. If you want to put out the fire of the Holy Spirit, you achieve this by shutting the mouths of the prophets. When the prophets speak no more – or when their words are rendered ineffective – the Holy Spirit does not work, for he works with the power of the Word of God.

### ***Despising of Word and sacraments***

Today we do not have prophesying in the same sense as in apostolic times. The revelation of God has now been completed and concluded. Prophecy has been replaced by preaching. Preaching is the normative proclamation of the gospel in the church, and it is made visible by and confirmed in the sacraments. These are the means of grace which the Holy Spirit uses today to edify us and encourage us in the faith.

A remarkable thing is that deformation and apostasy almost always begin with a despising of the preaching and the sacraments. We listen to the preacher, but we do not hear the Word of God. We are not using the sacraments, or we are using them improperly. We close our ears and eyes to the means of grace given in the church. Then slowly but surely the fire goes out.

For it is by means of Word and sacrament that the Spirit comes to us, and if we block off these ways, we quench the Spirit indeed.

If the Spirit is quenched, we lose sight of Christ's great work of salvation. Sin is then no longer something that should be avoided. We begin to accustom ourselves to various forms of evil. We do not hang on to what is good, but we widen our horizon to include what is forbidden. Satan gains ground at our expense.

### ***Our personal life***

What holds true for the worship services, also applies to our personal life. How do we quench the Spirit? We do so by not allowing God to work in us by his Word, by becoming lax with respect to prayer, by not consciously leading a life of faith before God every day again, and by blocking out the comfort and the encouragement of the Word as preached on Sunday.

Every Sunday in worship we are assured again of God's love toward us in Christ. We need to live in the fellowship of the life-giving Spirit. Therefore it is good that we hear this admonition: do not quench the Spirit. Let the Spirit's activity continue in our lives from day to day. Instead of quenching this activity, we must *foster* it. You have to keep a fire burning. There's a song that has a line like this: put another log on the fire. We do so by *heeding* the prophecy instead of despising it.

### ***Test everything***

It is quite remarkable that right after the admonition not to quench the Spirit by despising prophesying, we read that we ought to test everything. A Christian puts everything to the test of the Word of God, and if something does not measure up he rejects it.

There are explainers who relate the verb to test first to prophesying. Prophesying should not be despised, but tested. When you hear the prophecy – in our case the preaching – don't neglect it, but test it.

Prophesying, we saw, is the revealing or explaining of God's counsel of redemption. This prophesying was done by people who were fallible in themselves. Today the preaching is performed by weak, limited, and sinful men. That might lead us to despise it. We could say that the preaching is only what the minister thinks; it is certainly not what God says. But that is a wrong and misleading manner of getting away from under the preaching of the Word. We are to *test* the prophesying by preachers in the church.

## **Weigh what is said**

How does one test prophesying? The apostle Paul in this connection explained to the Corinthians how they should deal with the gift of prophesying in their time. He said (1 Cor 12:29-31), "Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. If a revelation is made to another sitting by, let the first be silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and be encouraged."

In the apostolic time not all prophets were true prophets. The work of prophets had to be properly scrutinized. People may claim to bring the word of God, but this is not always the case. Weighing is needed.

The same is true of preaching; perhaps even more so now since there is no new revelation coming. The minister simply explains the Word of God, as best he can, but the hearers must actively weigh what is said. The verb to weigh here is equivalent to the verb to consider carefully. Weigh it to see if it is scriptural. Weigh it to see if it is applicable. Weigh it with respect to its truth and meaning for your life.

The very fact that preaching must be weighed or tested means that it is not perfect. Impure elements can very easily creep into a sermon. Wrong explanations can be given. One-sided applications can be made.

There is no rule in the Lord's churches that you have to believe something simply because the minister or any other office bearer says so. We are bound only to the Word of God, and when the preachers proclaim the true Word of the Lord, we cannot get away from its power. We have the calling to weigh what is said, and to apply the normative preaching of the Gospel to our lives.

This does not mean that we should sit in church critically to see if we can catch the preacher on an error or can discover some inconsistency. There must be a basis of trust between preacher and congregation. It is not without reason that ministers must be well-tested by the churches and must subscribe to the pure doctrine of the Scriptures.

This does mean that every member must be actively involved with the Word that is preached. The Word should be a subject of further consideration and discussion at home in a positive-critical sense. The worst thing that can befall a church is that being neither hot nor cold it just lays the preaching aside and continues as if nothing had been said (cf. Rev 3:16). Watch how soon the Spirit is quenched in such a church. We always must be aware of this danger.

Don't neglect the Word. Do not despise prophesying, but weigh what is said. Listen carefully, and let the Word work in you. Open your mind and

your heart. Ponder what has been said. Seek further knowledge on the basis laid in the preaching.

Then you will develop the ability to discern everything in the light of the Scriptures. Then you can understand the connection: do not despise prophesying *but* test everything. Put everything to the test of God's Word. Let the light of God's Word shine on everything so that you see things in their true light. Develop a critical apparatus which is formed by the Holy Spirit.

### ***Hold fast what is good***

What is the purpose and the result of this proper testing of everything? "Hold fast what is good." We will learn to discern between what is good and evil, beneficial and destructive, and we will reject everything that leads us away from the service of God. You will "hold fast," that is, hang on to what is good.

Do you see how we must foster the activity of the Holy Spirit in our lives? We do so by receiving the Word, weighing it carefully, and applying it. Then the fire will not go out. We will grow in spiritual discernment to distinguish between what is good and evil. We do not drift away from God but grow ever closer to him. Jesus Christ more and more takes control of our lives and takes form in our lives.

We should not be amazed that we are told to foster the activity of the Holy Spirit. This does not mean that the Spirit's activity *depends* on ours. He remains sovereign and almighty. But it has pleased the Spirit of God to institute these simple means of grace. We are called and obliged to use these means. That is our responsibility as congregation and individual members. For we have been bought with the precious blood of the Lord and filled with his Spirit so that we may be aglow in faith.

The Lord Jesus Christ in his great love has poured out his Spirit over the church. With this Spirit we are sealed until the great day of redemption. It is confirmed to us by Word and sacrament. Therefore it is said to each one of us that we must yield to this Spirit, not grieve or quench him, but be on fire for God's glory

Foster the work of the Spirit by submitting to this blessed Word, and by opening your hearts and lives to the probing, restoring, uplifting, and healing power of the Spirit of God through the simple means of grace.