

## **AN APPEAL FOR TOLERANCE**

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**Chinese Christian Church of New Jersey**

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### **Scripture Reading: Ephesians 4:1-16**

Today and next Sunday we will be considering some of the controversial teachings as they relate to the person and work of the Holy Spirit. The controversial teachings I am talking about are not new, and in some ways God has used these controversies to lead me from one place to another.

When Janiene and I decided to enter into full-time ministry, our first consideration was to join the staff of Campus Crusade for Christ (CCC). However, at that time (CCC has since changed their policy) all full-time personnel with that organization had to sign a statement stating they would never speak in tongues. For some very personal reasons, we felt that we could not sign such a statement. Instead, we decided to join the Christian and Missionary Alliance. The Christian and Missionary Alliance (C&MA) did not forbid their workers from practicing the gift of tongues. Our decision to join the C&MA led us to New York and to Chinatown and eventually to Taiwan. Then, two years ago, while I served as pastor of the English congregation of the United Christian Church in Los Angeles, I was forced again to face the issue of tongues; however, this time the pressure I faced came from the other extreme. Guest speakers were brought into my congregation on a regular basis. Some of these speakers would systematically teach the people in my congregation to speak in tongues during public meetings without interpretation. I felt that this teaching was not Biblical, and I knew that I had to challenge it from the pulpit. But I was not given permission to share my viewpoint to the people of my own congregation, so I resigned. That resignation led me here. So there were at least two occasions in my life where God used the controversial topic that I will address today and next Sunday to cause me to make major changes in my life.

The basic appeal of this sermon will be an appeal for tolerance that is motivated by love. It is an appeal to create an environment where people with different experiences and different viewpoints on this subject can worship and serve together in the same church. It is an appeal to avoid forcing other people to accept one controversial position over another controversial position. I know the kind of tolerance I wish to see happen is very difficult to achieve; nonetheless, the appeal of this sermon is for tolerance.

The first step I will take in my appeal for tolerance as we discuss the controversial teachings concerning the person and work of the Holy Spirit is to summarize the positions. When I am done, I think you will understand why it is difficult for there to be tolerance when one person tries to force another person to accept his controversial viewpoint on this subject.

At the center of the controversy are the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the power needed to exercise the gifts. There is very little controversy over the fruit of the Holy Spirit. People who profess to be Christians don't usually get upset when they hear a message on the

topic of love or any of the other fruits of the Spirit mentioned in Bible. But as soon as we talk about the gifts of the Holy Spirit, it is a different story. People don't argue over the fact that there are gifts. And people don't dispute the fact that the Holy Spirit is the one who empowers us to use the gifts. We seem to all agree that we cannot rely on our own strength to serve God. Our strength must come from the Holy Spirit.

But there are controversial teachings, and I would like to present those to you at this time.

There are some people who teach that some of the more sensational gifts of the Holy Spirit mentioned in the Bible have passed out of use completely and should not be sought by present-day Christians. And, this is the first controversial teaching that I would like to talk about. This teaching maintains that certain gifts were intended by God to be at the church's disposal only during the apostolic age. Afterwards, they were withdrawn.

This teaching begins with the argument that the only way for a certain person to be an apostle of Jesus Christ is for that person to be an eye-witness of the resurrection. That is how they define an apostle. Thus, they conclude the "gift of apostleship" no longer exists. As soon as everyone who was an eye-witness of the resurrection died, the gift died with them.

It is further argued that the apostles were the ones chosen by God to write the New Testament Scriptures. It is said that special inspiration of the Holy Spirit granted for the writing of the New Testament was restricted to one generation.

Using this reasoning as a foundation, it is then concluded that prophets were necessary only until the canon of scripture was complete. And, since evangelists were special delegates of the apostles, the gift of evangelism is also something of the past. Thus, we have already eliminated three out of the four gifts mentioned in Ephesians 4. The only one remaining is the gift of pastor-teacher.

Those who hold to this controversial position still accept that gift.

Using the same line of reasoning I have just stated, the sensational gifts listed in 1 Corinthians 12 are also eliminated. I am talking about the gifts of miracles, and healing, and tongues and "utterance of knowledge." It is argued that these gifts were given only for a period of time to either help the apostles write the New Testament or to authenticate that the apostles were indeed the ones chosen by God to write the New Testament Scriptures. Once the Scriptures had been written, the gifts were no longer needed. The New Testament is now complete. All that needs to be said has been said, and nothing more should be added.

1 Corinthians 13:8-10 says "But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears." Now the teachers who hold to this controversial position argue the "perfection" in 1 Corinthians 13:10 is a reference to the New Testament Scriptures.

People use the writings of famous Bible teachers such as John Calvin and Benjamin Warfield to support this controversial position. And whether or not we agree with this position, it does us good to understand why people believe the way they do.

Of course, if a certain person holds to this position, that person has little choice but to conclude that anyone today who claims to have the gift of tongues or healing or prophecy or miracles or word of knowledge is making a false claim. And any apparent display of power by people claiming to have these gifts is counterfeit. Actually counterfeit is a kind word. Some will come right out and say that it is of the devil. And that kind of talk is guaranteed to cause people to feel upset. It is certainly not the best way to create an atmosphere of tolerance.

One thing that this controversial position and the other controversial position I will share next have in common is that both positions are arrived at through logical arguments rather than from direct scripture references.

Take, for example, the teaching that some of the gifts mentioned in the Bible were intended only for a generation. There is nowhere in the Bible where we find a clear statement that any of the gifts have passed away. The idea that the gospel required authentication with signs and wonders for one generation only has to be deduced or concluded through logic. We simply cannot find a verse of scripture that states it plainly.

In fact, in the New Testament passages that list the gifts, the sensational gifts are often placed side by side with the gifts that are not so sensational. In 1 Corinthians 12:8,10 the gift of wisdom is placed beside the gift of healing. In Romans 12:6-8 the exercise of prophecy is placed beside the giving of aid. In Ephesians 4:11 the office of evangelist is listed with that of pastor-teacher. In 1 Corinthians 12:28, helpers and administrators are mentioned with those who speak in tongues. Why, if the two types of gifts are fundamentally different in character, does not Paul give them separate treatment instead of mixing them together indiscriminately?

And, for many Bible teachers, the passing away of the old and the coming of the perfection talked about in 1 Corinthians 13 is a reference to the passing away of normal life as we know it now. Many believe it to be a reference to the new heaven and the new earth that will come after Christ returns again. At that time, all the gifts will pass away, not just the sensational ones.

Probably the greatest problem that most people have with this position is the effect it has on the life of the church. In the book of Acts we see that ordinary preaching is mixed with miracles of healing. Common-sense decisions like the appointment of deacons to "serve at tables" stand shoulder-to-shoulder with divine directions from angels and from the Holy Spirit. An ordinary prayer meeting leads to a miraculous rescue from prison. If, in our church life, we forbid anything having to do with the miraculous to take place, what do we have left? Are the things that happened in the book of Acts only for our historic reference, or are they supposed to give us an idea of what God intended church life to be like?

The weakness of this first controversial position is its lack of scriptural proof. The position is based on logical conclusions from certain scriptural passages, but it lacks a clear scriptural statement. Is the conclusion is right or wrong? Each one of us must answer that question ourselves.

But let's now take a look at another controversial position. The controversial teaching that I am now going to present focuses in on the source of power needed to exercise the gifts and the purpose of the gifts. The fact that power is needed is not disputed. The disputed question is how do we plug into the power?

There are people who teach that an experience separate from salvation is needed to plug into the power. Some people even teach that the Holy Spirit is not given at the point a person is saved by grace and becomes a Christian. They say that a second experience is needed in order to receive the Holy Spirit. But Romans 8:9 clearly states that anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ living within him does not belong to Christ. Thus, not too many people will go so far as to say that Christians need a second experience to receive the Holy Spirit. But they will say that Christians need a second experience for the Holy Spirit's power to be released. Some people will call this second experience "The Baptism of the Holy Spirit." Nowadays it is often referred to as the "Anointing of the Holy Spirit." Many teachers will say that speaking in tongues is evidence that you have had this second experience. And some teachers will say that speaking in tongues is the key that unlocks the door to receiving the power.

Please notice with me the proof-texts that people use who hold to this position. First of all, we have the first two chapters of Acts.

In Acts 1 we see a group of people who were obviously Christian. In Acts 2:4 we see the same group being filled with the Holy Spirit. They immediately began to speak in tongues. Then, they began to witness. And, in the rest of the book of Acts, we see them experiencing the power of the Holy Spirit in using all sorts of gifts.

Then, in Acts 8, we see a group of Samaritan converts who were obviously Christian (8:12), yet the Holy Spirit had not yet fallen upon them (8:16). When Peter and John laid hands on them, they received the Holy Spirit (8:17). It is assumed by many that the power or ability talked about in Acts 8:18-19 is speaking in tongues.

Next is Acts 9. There, we see a story of what is commonly referred to as Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus. Later, in verse 17, we see that Paul receives the Holy Spirit when Ananias lays hands upon him. It is assumed that Paul started speaking in tongues at this time because in 1 Corinthians 14 he says that he does speak in tongues.

Then, we have Acts 10:44-48 where we see a group of Gentiles in the house of Cornelius receiving the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues.

In Acts 19:1-6 Paul finds a group of disciples in Ephesus. He asks, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" And they said, "No, we have never even heard that there is

a Holy Spirit.” And he said “Into what were you baptized?” They said, “into John’s baptism.” And, Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance...” On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And, when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them; and they spoke with tongues and prophesied.

The popular preacher, Benny Hinn, likes to use Mark 16:17 as a proof text that tongues is an evidence that Christians have been anointed by the Holy Spirit. There we read these words, “And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well.”

Now, with this brief review of scripture, can you see why so many people are convinced that, in addition to salvation, a second experience is needed to plug into the power of the Holy Spirit, and that speaking in tongues verifies that a person has had the second experience?

We may not agree with this controversial position, but it is important that we understand why people believe the way they do. Of course, if a certain person holds to this position, that person will look upon those who have not yet had the second experience and who have not yet begun to speak in tongues as being incomplete in some way. They will try to persuade their brothers and sisters in Christ to experience the same thing they have experienced.

But, the one thing this controversial position has in common with the other controversial position is a lack of clear statements from the Bible. The Bible does not come right out and say that Christians need to have a second experience in order to experience the power of the Holy Spirit and that such an experience is verified by the speaking of tongues.

History is wonderful, but history cannot become the basis of doctrinal teaching. For instance, Acts 2:44-45 records the historical fact that the early Christians had everything in common. “Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.” My sister once joined a cult that required her to sell everything she had and to share everything (even her underwear) with everyone else. That cult tried to turn a historical fact into a doctrinal teaching that everyone had to follow. The book of Acts records that the early Christians often met in the temple courts. Does that mean we have to meet in the courts of Jewish temples in order for our church gatherings to be valid?

When we want to develop doctrine, we must turn to teachings of the New Testament. The historical accounts are not enough. And when we turn to the teachings, what do we find?

In the teachings of Jesus on the Holy Spirit that are mostly found in John 14-16, there is not one mention of a special second experience and tongues. And, the epistles are also silent. The Holy Spirit is repeatedly mentioned in the books of Romans and Ephesians, but there is not one word about a second experience. From the epistles, it seems clear that the term “Baptism of the Holy Spirit” is a reference to conversion rather than a reference to a second

experience. 1 Corinthians 12:13 says, "By one Spirit we were all baptized into one body whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit."

Certainly, if this controversial teaching were so important, our Lord would have said something about it, and we would find it in the teachings of the epistles.

And then, a careful examination of the proof-texts that teachers use from the book of Acts also raises questions. Acts 2 records the very first time the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the church. It does not represent the normal experience of a Christian. We don't have to wait until Pentecost to receive the Holy Spirit. Pentecost has already come.

The story in Acts 8 is difficult to understand, but it also does not appear to be a normal situation. Perhaps God allowed the events to happen the way they did in order to prove to the Jewish Christians that the Gentiles conversion experience was valid. In any case, there is not clear mention of tongues being spoken at the time.

In regard to Paul's conversion experience recorded in Acts 9, a closer examination of the story indicates that his conversion and his being filled with the Holy Spirit happened simultaneously (Acts 9:17-18). They were not two separate experiences, and there is no mention of speaking in tongues.

In Acts 10 there is mention of speaking in tongues, but conversion and receiving of the Holy Spirit happened at the same time. The fact that the Gentiles were speaking in tongues was more proof that they were Christians than it was proof that they had a second experience. And, it seems like the Jewish Christians needed that proof.

Then, in Acts 19, we are not reading a story of people who were baptized as Christians and then later had a second experience where they were baptized with the Holy Spirit. It is a story of a group of people who were baptized into John's baptism. They had not yet heard the complete gospel. After Paul explained the gospel to them, they believed, were baptized, and received the Holy Spirit and began to speak in tongues. It all happened together.

It is true that Benny Hinn uses Mark 16:17 to support his teaching that tongues are a sign that a person has received the second experience of being anointed with the Holy Spirit. But, Mark 16:17 does not say, "These signs will accompany those who have been anointed by the Holy Spirit." It says, "These signs will accompany those who believe."

So the main points of this controversial teaching on the Holy Spirit are: 1) that a Christian must have a second experience in order to receive or release the power needed to use the spiritual gifts; and 2) that speaking in tongues is either the key to releasing the power or an evidence that the power has been released. These teachings must be deduced from scripture. They are not clearly stated.

Now, the main reason I want to preach this sermon is not to create friction between this controversial position and the first controversial position stated in this sermon. I want to

reduce the friction. I want there to be an atmosphere of love-motivated tolerance. Some people say that the best way to promote an atmosphere of tolerance is to remain silent on this subject, but I have not chosen that approach.

I am learning that the best way I can promote an atmosphere of love-motivated tolerance and mutual acceptance between myself and another person is to understand how that person thinks. As a pastor, I have had to work with other pastors who teach either one or the other of the controversial positions I have described today. Before I understood why they believed what they believed, it was easy for me to be disgusted with their attitudes. After understanding, it is easier for me to love and accept them even though I still disagree with them. When my senior pastor in California and I parted ways, I was able to part with good feelings toward him. It would have been hard for me to have good feelings toward him if I had not taken the time to understand why he believed the way he did.

So, in order for there to be mutual tolerance and acceptance in a church, we need to understand one another even when we disagree. And then, we need to discern the difference between the things that are fundamental to our faith and the things that are secondary in importance. As long as people from both controversial positions can agree that there are more important doctrines that are fundamental to our faith, then they might be willing to be less forceful in pushing their controversial teachings on the subject of the Holy Spirit. For instance, if both sides can agree that the teaching to love one another is more important than pushing their controversial teachings on other people; then for the sake of love, both sides can agree to keep silent.

The silence I am talking about now is different from the kind of silence I first mentioned. The first kind of silence I mentioned results in ignorance. We should not be silent about the different teachings on the Holy Spirit. We must strive to understand one another. But, after we understand one another, it might be best to keep silent; especially if pushing our positions causes tension between ourselves and the people we are commanded to love.

When I was in California, the senior pastor and I did take a lot of time to understand one another's positions. Afterwards, he and the other pastors advised me to keep silent for the sake of love and unity in the Body of Christ. I told them that, for the sake of love and unity in the Body of Christ, I would keep silent if they, too, would keep silent and stop inviting outside speakers to push their controversial teaching on people from my congregation. But, they were unable to agree to that arrangement. So, for the sake of love and unity in the body of Christ, I resigned.

Some churches will take a firm stand for or against one of the controversial teachings I have just presented, and they will put their firm stand in writing and require their members to agree to the statement. But, if we do that here at CCCNJ, I am afraid that it will force people to resign. My desire is that people in our church who hold such strong positions can first of all understand each other's positions; and second, for the sake of love and unity, agree not to push their strong teachings on others. This is what I am calling love-motivated tolerance, and it is the main appeal of this sermon.

It is more important that love prevail in our congregation than it is for us to persuade others that they are wrong and we are right in regards to these controversial teachings on the Holy Spirit.

My mother believes in the doctrine of transubstantiation. That doctrine teaches that the communion bread, when blessed by the priest, really does change into the physical body of Christ. And, she believes that the communion wine, when blessed by the priest, really does change into the physical blood of Christ. But, I believe that the bread and wine (grape juice in our case) are only symbolic of Christ's body that was already broken and Christ's blood that was shed on the cross. For years, my mother and I couldn't talk about anything spiritual without the conversation eventually turning into a debate that caused friction in our relationship. But, over the years, we have learned that we are not going to convince one another that the other person is wrong. We no longer try to persuade one another, because neither of us believe it to be the most important thing about our faith.

Last week, I spoke to Dr. Richard Fales on the subject of the Holy Spirit. We talked on the phone and then he sent me his personal notes on the subject. At the end of his notes, he wrote me this bit of advice that I will now pass on to you. He wrote,

*As believers in Christ, we must never let our interpretation of minor doctrines divide our unity and our fellowship in the Lord. The greatest gift is love (1 Corinthians 13:13). It is this love that brings unity in spite of our differences and draws the body of Christ together in its supreme mission, winning the lost, edifying the saints and taking the gospel to all nations.*