

Manifestations of the Spirit

Dan Nighswander

“To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:7).¹

“The United Brethren encouraged great emotional expression in their revival meeting—with crying, shouting, and singing—even jumping or leaping around the room. These spiritual expressions were an attraction for some observers, and a sign of religious superficiality to others.”²

Albert says he has never encountered God or had his prayers answered, so he does not believe there is a God. Bethany thinks Albert is being obtuse, because she senses spirits constantly and has no doubt that they link her to God. Carl is suspicious of Bethany’s vague definitions, because he sees God’s presence in the order and logic of the natural sciences. Delores dismisses science; she encounters God through speaking in tongues and wishes everyone could have this faith-shaping experience. Elmer would like to speak in tongues, but it has not happened for him; while he waits for that, he is sure that if people would do more to promote justice and equity, they would know God through doing God’s work. Florence says Elmer is trying to earn his salvation, and she is satisfied to encounter God in the Scriptures, especially the Gospels, because we cannot do better than knowing Jesus. Grant does not have much patience with the Bible, but he knows that on August 17, 1988, he was born again, and if others cannot testify to having had a similar conversion, he does not see how they can claim to have met God. And so on.


Spiritual elitism shows up in many ways. It can be based on criteria of holding the “right” theology, practicing the “right” forms of worship, belonging to the “right” denomination or religion, doing the “right” things (or, more often, not doing the “wrong” things), or having the “right” (or

1 Unless otherwise identified, scripture references are to 1 Corinthians; quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

2 Samuel J. Steiner, *In Search of Promised Lands: A Religious History of Mennonites in Ontario* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald, 2015), 44.

occasionally on not having the “wrong”) experiences of encountering God.

Comparing God-encounters and ranking their value is a common practice. Some people think their own experiences are inadequate, perhaps not even valid, and envy what others report. Some people have



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been so deeply moved by their encounters with God that they think everyone should have the same experience. Sometimes people identify a particular experience as essential to the definition of who is “in” and dismiss the validity of any experience that falls short of that.

We might learn something valuable from 1 Corinthians which addresses, among other topics, the question of how God is revealed to or experienced by fol-

lowers of Jesus.³ A large part of this letter is Paul’s response to a letter he had received from the church in Corinth (7:1 begins, “Now concerning the matters about which you wrote . . .”). We do not have the letter Paul is responding to, but insofar as we can reconstruct what prompted Paul’s response, part of it must have said something like this:

*We are delighted to report that many of us have been gifted by the Holy Spirit to speak in tongues. This has become a large part of our worship service, and it builds up our faith. We think this demonstrates our spiritual maturity, and we want everyone in the assembly to speak in tongues.*⁴

In this reconstruction, there is no sign of controversy or division, but Paul knew that the Christians in Corinth were divided on many issues. The purpose of his letter was to counter those divisions, with the goal “that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose” (1:10). The question is what divisions lurked behind their celebration of speaking in tongues.

3 The following comments draw from my commentary *1 Corinthians*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald, 2017).

4 Nighswander, *1 Corinthians*, 270.

To answer that question, we must understand that people in the first-century Mediterranean world sought honour and avoided its opposite, shame. Honour was viewed as a limited good for which everyone competed. Honour status was gained by taking it from other people. It should not surprise us that these values were applied by Christians seeking the most honourable spiritual experiences and defending their “achievements” in comparison with what others had experienced.

From Paul’s letter, we see that some Corinthian Christians claimed the honour of their wisdom, power, and noble birth (1:27). Their boasting (1:29, 31) and arrogance (4:18, 18; 5:2) demonstrated their sense of superiority over fellow Christians and fellow Corinthians alike. Some of the Christians (perhaps the “wise, powerful and well-born,” perhaps others) were arrogant and boastful about their spiritual experiences, including their capacity to “speak in tongues.” Surely this display of divine blessing demonstrated their close relationship with God.

Paul agreed with his correspondents that speaking in tongues is a good way to encounter God—indeed, he himself practiced this more than anyone else (14:18), and he wished that everyone would have that experience (14:5). But he recognized that this does not happen.

Against those who were fixated on one kind of encounter with the Spirit, Paul pointed to many ways that the Spirit is “manifested”—that is, how the presence and activity of God’s Spirit is revealed or demonstrated. That is the expression he used to talk about encounters with God: “manifestations of the Spirit” (12:7). And he was adamant that the Spirit is manifested in many ways—many “gifts,” many “services,” and many “activities” (12:4–6). He offers first a representative list of nine ways in which the Spirit is manifested (12:8–10), and then repeats it with variations in 12:28 and 12:29–30. Together these comprise a list of eleven manifestations of the Spirit, or ways of encountering God. This is not a comprehensive list; he could have added others, as he did in Romans 12:6–8 and Ephesians 4:11.

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The common English translations may mislead our understanding of what Paul was writing about. Most of them introduce this part of the letter as “concerning spiritual gifts” (12:1; see also 14:1). The Greek word is simply “the spiritual” (*pneumatikos*), or “spiritual things.” In other words, Paul is addressing ways that people encounter God. Every such encounter is a gift in the sense that it is given freely by God “who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses” (12:9, 11). But it was not “talents” or “abilities” that he had in mind, as we might think of “spiritual gifts.” Rather, they are ways in which God’s Spirit is manifested so that we humans can encounter God in ways that speak to our various needs.

With this understanding in mind, let us paraphrase the initial list that Paul offers in 12:8–10:

*One person encounters God through the Spirit by hearing the utterance of wisdom,
and another by hearing the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit,
another experiences God through faith by the same Spirit,
another sees God in gifts of healing by the one Spirit,
another in the working of miracles,
another hears God’s voice through proclamation,
another by the discernment of spirits,
another by hearing or speaking with various kinds of tongues,
and yet another through the interpretation of tongues.*

And though these manifestations are given *through* individuals, they are given not *for* individuals but for the common good (12:7). Paul acknowledged the Corinthian Christians’ passion for encountering God. He even encouraged them to be zealous in seeking Spirit manifestations (12:31). But he had different criteria than they had for ranking those experiences. Most important was the impact of the experience on others. “For those who speak in a tongue do not speak to other people but to God; for nobody understands them, since they are speaking mysteries in the Spirit. On the other hand, those who prophesy speak to other people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation” (14:2–3).

This consideration is repeated several times in different ways in chapter fourteen. Paul commonly used “building up” language, such as, “Let all things be done for building up” (14:26). This was applied to fellow believers who might witness or hear about manifestations of the Spirit.

Paul was also concerned for visitors who attend a Christian worship service. If they observe and hear demonstrations of the Spirit's presence that they do not understand, he wrote, they will dismiss it: "Will they not say that you are out of your mind?" (14:23). But if they hear and understand a prophetic word, they will encounter God: "That person will bow down before God and worship him, declaring, 'God is really among you'" (14:25).

Encounters with God strengthen the faith and shape the life of the person who experiences them. Paul's experience, which is reported three

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times in Acts (9:1–22; 22:3–21; 26:1–18), was a prime example of this. Yet, the reports always emphasize the impact of those encounters on others: "For I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and testify to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you" (Act 26:16). Paul describes that dramatic and personal experience as a calling: "God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gen-


tiles" (Galatians 1:15–16). When he wrote to the Christians in Corinth that the primary purpose of encounters with God is the "upbuilding and encouragement and consolation" of others (14:2–3), and especially of "outsiders or unbelievers" (14:23), he could point to his own experience as a model.

In the middle of writing about manifestations of the Spirit, Paul inserted two digressions that elaborate how these experiences are to be received in the faith community. The first of these uses the human body as an analogy for diversity and mutuality: "Just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ" (12:12). The metaphor was commonly used in ancient times to argue that it is necessary for lesser members of the body politic to defer to those in control. Paul used it for the opposite argument. The weaker and more hidden parts of the body, he wrote, are "indispensable" and owed "greater honor" (12:22–24). No part of the body, and

likewise no part of the faith community, can deny their own part, and none can deny the value and integrity of others.

“We were all made to drink of one Spirit,” Paul wrote (12:13). Their common source validates each person’s religious experiences. The examples in my opening paragraph may reflect a natural inclination to fixate on the ways we ourselves have encountered God. That was the case also among the Corinthian Christians. But Paul rejected that. The person who speaks in tongues, he wrote, must also honor the one who speaks a prophetic word. The one who works for justice must also honor the one who studies the Scriptures. The one who experiences a gift of healing must also honor the one who speaks wisdom and the one who sees God in logic. And the one whose experiences of God are tentative, undramatic, and ambiguous is above all to be respected and honored.

Paul’s second “digression” is the well known “love chapter” (13).



To people who were proud of their spiritual experiences, Paul wrote that however they encountered God, it was “nothing” if practiced without love for others in the community.

Though it can be used for weddings, as it often is, the context of this chapter is in fact a faith community that is divided and contentious about many things—not least, their tendency to spiritual elitism. To people who were proud of their spiritual experiences, Paul wrote that however they encountered God, it was “nothing” if practiced without love for others in the community. “Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude,” he wrote to people who were exactly that.

“It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful” (13:4–5). When believers share with each other their experiences of God, they should both speak and hear each other in love that “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (13:7).

The literary form of 1 Corinthians is that of a letter, which is part of an ongoing conversation. It is not a systematic essay, so it does not answer all our questions. For example, it does not speak to questions about whether and how God is encountered in religions other than Christianity. And although Paul mentions “discernment of spirits,” he does not say how to do that or by what criteria we might recognize when a spirit reveals God and when it does not. But it does challenge a limited view of what is an “appropriate” experience of God, and it challenges a self-gratifying possessiveness of such encounters.

The Spirit of God reveals itself in many ways, and these are given for building up the community of faith and for convincing unbelievers of the presence and activity of God. Such encounters are gifts to be received humbly and honoured whenever they occur.

About the author

Dan Nighswander lives in Winnipeg, Manitoba. He has served as a pastor, denominational administrator, teacher, and missionary. Now retired, he continues to serve the church in volunteer capacities and to witness the Spirit manifested in many ways.