

2 TIMOTHY 1:6

FAN THE FLAME

“For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands.”¹

For many Christians, perhaps even for most Christians, the immediate changes that accompanied the new birth linger as a hallowed memory. These blessed souls experienced a newfound *joie de vivre* that had not been known previously. Though she may not have been fanatical about the matter, the new believer wanted to speak openly of what God had done in her life. She knew that whereas previously she had been dead to the True and Living God, she was now alive—more alive than she could have thought possible. It was well-nigh impossible not to tell others, pointing them to the freedom from guilt and condemnation that she now experienced in Christ the Lord. That newborn child of God felt as though a permanent smile was painted on her face and she bubbled over with vibrant excitement at the thought that she was loved not because of who she was, but simply because she was.

There seem always to be found among the churches individuals who appear to have been weaned on dill pickles. They so suppress any expression of joy that you would believe that were they to smile their face would break. Even the laughter of these sardonic souls chills the soul. They give the impression that their primary purpose in life is to stifle any joy that a believer may express. I recall one such sourpuss who was present on a particular evening.

I was chairing an evangelistic crusade in a Canadian city. Each evening, many people were responding to the invitation of the evangelist. On one particular evening as I walked through the inquiry room, a young man was seated all alone, beaming and quite obviously excited. I stopped to speak with him at the invitation of the counsellor who had just led him to faith in the Son of God. The young man immediately began to speak of how excited he was because Christ had saved him. He was positively bubbling over—he could not be silent.

As we spoke, a pastor from one of the co-operating churches wandered into the inquiry room. He recognised the young man and walked over to hear what was being said. The young man immediately began to tell that pastor of God’s gracious gift and how excited he was because God had saved him. That dour denizen of darkness dressed in clerical garb condescendingly patted that young man on the shoulder and said, “There, there, you’ll get over that.” Is it possible that that minister never knew the joy of salvation? It certainly seemed to be the case.

I could not contain my indignation. I exploded, pointedly saying to that new believer, “Don’t listen to him! He doesn’t know what he’s talking about! I pray you never get over this! God has done a wonderful work in your life, changing you and starting you on a journey that will lead to transformation into the image of His Son. Don’t listen to this man! Ignore him! And don’t bother going to his church—ever! He will steal your joy!”

The tragedy of that story is that that minister is too often not the exception among the professed people of God. Rather, his attitude reducing the Faith to a mere religion consisting of a series of rituals, is the rule in too many cases. Perhaps Timothy, tired from the constant struggle to be righteous, was beginning to go through the motions of worship without worshipping. What is certain is that Paul saw the need for the young minister to be reenergised.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Wheaton: Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

The message is intended for weary Christians. I have but one message for those who are pretending to be Christians, and that is to believe on the Lord Jesus and be saved. Those pitiful creatures that only know religion but have never been born from above do not deserve the honoured title of Christian. However, those who are Christians, those who know Christ Jesus the Lord, but who have grown weary in well-doing need the encouragement of the Apostle's words. "For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands."

PRECEDING EVENTS — "For this reason I remind you..." Break down the Apostle's words to Timothy. He begins by alluding to what he had just written. What prompted Paul to speak so pointedly to Timothy? The reason that Paul speaks so openly is the genuine Faith that Timothy possessed—the identical Faith, you will remember, that had been evident in both his grandmother and his mother.

The Apostle has focused on Timothy's godly heritage. Especially when one was raised in a godly home, the actions of that individual reflect on those with whom he was associated. Your parents, if they held to this Faith, are judged in part by your actions. Whether your life is a benediction to your training, or whether you live in rejection of the training with which you were invested, will be a matter of judgement by those who observe how you live out your life. As a teen, flexing my independence and moving beyond the immediate home, my father would often caution me, "Son, remember that you are my son. Don't do anything to make me ashamed." That warning served as a brake on many of the temptations that presented themselves.

Move beyond family, though family is admittedly essential. As a member of this congregation, as one who participates in the worship of this particular church, how you live reflects on the teaching you have received. Your choices reflect on those with whom you share worship. Too often the professed people of God treat the congregation of the righteous as a religious club. They join when they feel like it; and they quit whenever they wish. Candidly, if the community of faith is a mere organisation, then the individual can be the sole arbiter of her decision. She can join at her pleasure and she can quit when she wills. Paul undoubtedly refers to such people when he writes, "Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica" [2 TIMOTHY 4:10].

The fellowship is family. I don't doubt that there are tensions in every human family; however, only a sociopath would leave his family, renouncing his heritage because he was angry. We make the effort to work through our disappointments and our displeasures because we are family. However, when someone is angry at others in the church, the mere fact that that person can walk away bespeaks a disconcerting truth—they never were part of the family! An individual may grow angry with the pastor; and so he quits the fellowship. Did the rest of the congregation hurt him? Was he attacked by others? The dark truth is that such people love this world more than they love the truth; they are lovers of themselves rather than lovers of God.

Writing early Christians, the Apostle of Love spoke pointedly concerning those who walk away from the fellowship of believers. "They left us. However, they were never really part of us. If they had been, they would have stayed with us. But by leaving they made it clear that none of them were part of us" [1 JOHN 2:19].² His words sting! They elicit excuses from those who walk away from the fellowship! However, the one walking away cannot evade the impact of what the Apostle has said. All the proffered rationales for walking away from the fellowship are reduced to bald-face lies in the glaring light of God's Word.

² **God's Word Translation** (Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, MI 1995)

If you have a heritage of being raised in the Faith, you must not forsake that heritage. Your actions reflect on those who taught you, it reflects on those who invested themselves in your life. Your actions must either betray an unhealthy self-love that has exalted your own interests above that of the truth, or your actions reveal a love for the Master and for His truth. You cannot say that you love God and despise the congregation of the righteous. Those who are of the truth must admit the truth of John's words, "We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother" [1 JOHN 4:19-21]. If you love your brothers, you will walk with your brothers. You will walk with them if you are convinced you are right in order to encourage them to walk in the truth. If you have no love for them, you can easily leave.

Though addressed in a previous message, fix the thought in your mind that Paul has in view "the Faith" and not belief. He is focused on the Body of Truth that defines what we as Christians believe. I've spoken often of the essential truths of the Faith. Though we Christians may differ on many matters, some matters are essential if we will bear that Holy Name. We must believe that Jesus our Master is very God and very man. We must accept that He presented His life as a sacrifice in the place of fallen mankind, that He was buried and that He conquered death, rising from the dead on the third day. There can be no disputing that He presented Himself alive to those to whom He chose to reveal Himself and that He ascended into Heaven where He is seated at the right hand of the Father. We must believe that it is by faith in Him—without effort or merit on our part—that sin is forgiven and we are accepted into the Family of God. We must believe that Jesus Himself is coming again to receive to Himself those who have believed in Him, those who are born from above. We accept that the authority for these truths is the written Word of God which is inerrant and infallible. To dissent from these stated truths is to deny that we have a vital relationship to the True and Living God.

Timothy is being told what he believes matters; and your beliefs matter also. If you are not committed to the Faith, if you do not hold to these truths that distinguish followers of the Christ from those living for the world's approval, why should you hazard your reputation and even your life to pursue righteousness? If righteousness is only an abstract concept that is fluid, always adapting to the changing ideals of this fallen society, why would you even attempt to hold to truth? And if you hold to these truths that mark the followers of Christ the Lord, then how can you disdain the church which He purchased with His own blood [see ACTS 20:28]?

Writing the Corinthian Christians, Paul discussed the doctrine of the resurrection from the dead. As he began that discussion, he made this observation. "If Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied" [1 CORINTHIANS 15:12-19].

If the Faith is a lie, then we are fools. However, if we only pretend to hold to this Faith, we are even greater fools because we are exposed to suffering for what we do not believe. Why adhere to teaching that is demonstrably false? Worse still, why pretend to believe teaching that is sure to bring censure and opprobrium from the watching world?

Pretenders to the Faith have plagued the faithful since earliest days. Peter warned, “False prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed. And in their greed they will exploit you with false words. Their condemnation from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep” [2 PETER 2:1-3].

Peter’s words anticipate the warning that Jude, the brother of our Lord, would write. “Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ” [JUDE 3, 4].

While I’ve always viewed these warnings as being delivered against those who would exert a measure of leadership, (appropriately so, I believe), these warnings when combined with the cautionary tenor of John’s First Letter easily apply to any professed member of the assembly. The reality of our grasp of doctrinal truth is revealed through perseverance in the Body. Rejecting the Body of Christ for our own dishonourable desires expresses contempt for Him who gave His life for the redeemed. Holding to sound doctrine leads to a walk of love. Walking in love with the people of God demonstrates our grasp of essential truth.

Shortly after the era of the Apostles, the churches struggled against infiltration by pseudo-Christians. Justin Martyr, in his “Dialogue with Trypho,” wrote of the presence of individuals best described as pseudo-Christians. “I pointed out to you that some who are called Christians, but are godless, impious heretics, teach doctrines that are in every way blasphemous, atheistical and foolish. But that you may know that I do not say this before you alone, I shall draw up a statement, so far as I can, of all the arguments which have passed between us; in which I shall record myself as admitting the very same things which I admit to you. For I choose to follow not men or men’s doctrines, but God and the doctrines [delivered] by Him. For if you have fallen in with some who are called Christians, but who do not admit this [truth], and venture to blaspheme the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob; who say there is no resurrection of the dead, and that their souls, when they die, are taken to heaven; do not imagine that they are Christians.”³

Fellow believers who observe our walk and how we strive to gain Christ’s approval are encouraged to persevere. There is an unseen host watching us, however. Angels observe the lives of us who believe, wondering all the while at what it means to be saved [see 1 PETER 1:10, 11]. However, I’m not referring to angels when I state that an unseen host watches us in our labours. In the Letter to Hebrew Christians, we read of the stalwarts of the Faith. The writer follows an unbroken lineage from Abel to Enoch, Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and down to Moses. He traces the walk of faith and included Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah. Continuing through David, Samuel and the Prophets, it seems as if the writer pauses before making this observation. “All these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect” [HEBREWS 11:39, 40].

³ Justin Martyr, “Dialogue of Justin with Trypho, a Jew,” in Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, (ed.), **The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, vol. 1, The Ante-Nicene Fathers** (Christian Literature Company, Buffalo, NY 1885) 239

At this point, the writer draws in those reading his words, reminding us that we are in a race. He urges us to strip away every hindrance, every item that might hinder our rush toward the finish line, always looking to Him who loved us and gave Himself for us. Look at the words! “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” [HEBREWS 12:1, 2]. In saying this, he makes a startling revelation. Look at that first verse again. “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses...”

Jesus led the race that all believers are called to run. He “endured the cross, despising the shame.” It was not only in order that He might be “seated at the right hand of the throne of God” that He endured. Jesus ran the race that He might bring many sons to glory [see HEBREWS 2:10]. He has perfected the Faith, running flawlessly that we would have a model for our own run. Others have gone before us, crossing the finish line and they are now waiting for each one as she or he crosses behind them. As each one completes the race, crossing the line into glory, the assembled saints, waiting to cheer us on and to rejoice before the One who redeemed us, worship the King. Jesus, having crossed that line exulted, “Here I am, with the children God has given me” [HEBREWS 2:13].⁴ Though the saints who have preceded us in this Faith cannot now see us, they are watching for our arrival, anticipating the full harvest of souls to the glory of our Great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ. When we cross the finish line, when we arrive in glory, we shall be greeted by a cheering throng who anticipate victory.

THE GIFT OF GOD WHICH IS IN YOU — “The gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands...” Now the focus is “the gift of God.” If I needed only to think of “the gift of God,” I would be quite capable of providing a ready exposition. However, it is Paul’s qualifying statement, “which is in you through the laying on of my hands,” that creates a difficulty. The Greek preposition *diá* (translated “through”) creates a difficulty with this passage. To be clear, there are several matters that complicate interpreting this particular verse. Two major problems that must be addressed are “What is the gift of God?” and “Is human mediation necessary for conveying this gift?” The two concepts are intimately related and should not be considered separately. As you can see, the verse is a challenge for the expositor of the Word.

As translated, the verse conveys the thought that grace can be transmitted through the human mediation. Such a thought fits with the theology of some of the major denominations within Christendom; and it is held loosely in popular theology. Whenever someone argues that only a “Reverend” can serve the Communion Meal, they are tacitly agreeing that grace is transmitted through the laying on of hands. Whenever someone contends that only an ordained minister can baptise, they are actually arguing for transmission of grace through the laying on of hands. Whether these individuals realise what they are saying or whether they are ignorant of the implication, they are arguing for apostolic succession, a foundation of Roman Catholicism.

I’m always intrigued by the concept of ordination among the Zion of God. The word “ordination” or “ordain” does not occur in the New Testament. Aaron and his sons were ordained and consecrated as priests [e.g., EXODUS 28:41-29:46; LEVITICUS 7:37-8:36], and ordination as practised among evangelical churches carries more of the liturgical concept as outlined under the Old Covenant than it does the New Testament idea of acceptance of God’s appointment. Let’s look at an instance of God at work appointing an individual to a particular work.

⁴ Biblical Studies Press, **The NET Bible First Edition** (Biblical Studies Press, 1996-2006)

In **ACTS 13:1-3** we read of the Church at Antioch setting aside Paul and Barnabas for missionary service. Here is what Dr. Luke wrote. “There were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch and Saul. While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off” [**ACTS 13:1-3**]. The Spirit of God communicated to a body including prophets and teachers that He was calling Saul and Barnabas. These godly men united in fasting and prayer before laying their hands on them and sending them off. The act of laying their hands on them appears to be a sign of blessing⁵ or acceptance of what God had already accomplished through calling them.⁶

Among the churches, laying hands on an individual signifies acceptance of what God has done in that individual’s life; it is a sign of acceptance of God’s appointment. This is the implication of Paul’s cautionary warning to Timothy in the earlier letter—“Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others; keep yourself pure” [**1 TIMOTHY 5:22**]. Since “the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” [**ROMANS 11:29**], it would be a terrible act to communicate grace to an unqualified individual through laying hands on such a one. It would mean that with time, the Faith would become utterly corrupted with a growing number of people who were mere pretenders to holy office. If spiritual gifts were communicated through human mediation, then the action would be liable to serious consequences. Such acts would compel God to accept unqualified individuals for service, though He had not appointed them. Individuals who are unqualified for holy service create a serious problem because they confuse the people of God through association with godly individuals who have acted unwisely.

This understanding would also fit with the other verse in which Paul referred to laying hands on Timothy. “Do not neglect the spiritual gift you have, given to you and confirmed by prophetic words when the elders laid hands on you” [**1 TIMOTHY 4:14**].⁷ The Greek preposition *διά* translated “through” in many Bibles, denotes not “means” but “accompanying circumstances.”⁸ Thus, the gift of God was accompanied by prophecy. There was no transmission via human hands of a spiritual gift—*chárisma*. There were prophecies spoken of what Timothy would accomplish; and these prophecies accompanied the act of receiving Timothy as God’s gift.

I recall with deep humility the evening when I was set apart to service by the First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas. Great men of God pronounced prophecies over me as they certified my gifts and calling. Doctor H. Leo Eddleman, Dr. C. Wade Freeman, Dr. Paige Patterson together with other elders prayed and prophesied. Each spoke a prophetic word as he acknowledged the gracious work God had already performed in my life. Each had sought God’s glory through years of service; and each prayed for God’s glory as he prophesied. What did not happen that evening was some mystical transfer of grace. These were men of God and not a shamanic group. The elders were setting apart to service a young man; they were not performing mystical rituals.

The laying on of hands was a sign of acceptance and not a means by which grace was communicated. Laying hands on an individual received as a gift designated for service given by the Lord was an act that accompanied the pronouncement of prophecies concerning anticipated service. The gift received appears to have been given by God for specific service. That gives us some understanding of what Timothy’s gift might have been.

⁵ E.g. **MATTHEW 19:13; MARK 5:23; 6:5**

⁶ E.g. **EXODUS 29:10-19; LEVITICUS 4:15; 16:21; NUMBERS 8:10-12; 27:18**

⁷ **NET Bible First Edition**

⁸ Translators’ note, **NET Bible First Edition**

Some scholars have suggested that it was God equipping Timothy to organise and administer the work of a church; and that is a reasonable assumption. To be certain, an elder is responsible to act with discretion in providing oversight, just as the Apostle has written in the earlier letter. “[An elder] must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church” [1 TIMOTHY 3:4, 5]? That makes far more sense than appealing to any of a number of potential spiritual gifts. It isn’t particularly important that an elder be capable of speaking in tongues or performing miracles; but administering the work of God is necessary.

Despite the appeal provided by this explanation, I don’t believe that is what Paul meant. My reason for looking for another, closer explanation is the construction of the letter itself. Perhaps you will recall that I pointed out that verses three through five are one sentence in the original letter, and how this demonstrates the intensity with which the Apostle wrote.⁹ Paul began another sentence with the sixth verse and continued without a break until the twelfth verse. In that original language, this is one long sentence, which is somewhat typical of the manner in which Paul wrote. That long sentence turned into an even longer sentence that comprises verses six through twelve. What Paul says in these verses is not to be taken as a series of disjointed thoughts; rather, he presents one comprehensive expression of how he is thinking. If we are to discover how he was thinking, it is quite likely that this will be revealed in the context of what was written; and we are asking what he had in mind when he spoke of “the gift of God.”

Reading just one verse beyond the text, I note that the Apostle speaks of the Spirit Christians have received. In 2 TIMOTHY 1:7 the Apostle writes, “God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.” Though he is speaking specifically to Timothy and including himself in the manner in which the Spirit works, it is nevertheless true that Paul has written a truth applicable to all believers. By writing this sentence, it is apparent that Paul has in view the Holy Spirit of God who dwells in each believer. It is apparent in reading this that the gift of God which Timothy received refers to the Spirit of God and not to a charismatic gift.

Only a few brief words beyond this sentence, the Apostle again focuses on the Holy Spirit when he writes, “By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you” [2 TIMOTHY 1:14]. That he is still focused on the Spirit of God and His work in the life of the believer seems to confirm that “the gift of God” to which Paul alludes is the Holy Spirit who lives within each believer.

You will no doubt recall that the Spirit of God was promised as a gift to all who believe. On the Day of Pentecost, Peter extended God’s offer to those who believe the message of life. He said, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself” [ACTS 2:38, 39]. The Spirit is God’s gift to each individual who believes.

Writing the Corinthian Christians, Paul will emphasise that the Spirit of God has transformed the life of each believer into a holy temple. “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body” [1 CORINTHIANS 6:19, 20]. The church of the Lord is also a holy temple [see 1 CORINTHIANS 3:16, 17; see also EPHESIANS 2:19-22; ROMANS 8:9]; nevertheless, the body of each believer is now a Temple of God’s Spirit.

⁹ Michael Stark, “Remembering You,” (Sermon), preached 22 February 2015, <http://newbeginningsbaptist.ca/clientimages/42652/sermonarchive/2%20timothy%201.03-06%20remembering%20you.pdf>

The Spirit is the gift. We tend to speak of a spiritual gift as the ability to “do” something; we treat the concept of a spiritual gift almost as an objective thing that we possess. However, it seems more accurate in light of Scripture to think of the Spirit as the gift and whatever newly imparted ability that is our immediate focus as the way in which the Holy Spirit expresses Himself. A spiritual gift is best seen as the Holy Spirit being Himself uniquely through an individual believer. All believers receive the Holy Spirit as we have already seen; but the Holy Spirit sovereignly chooses the manner in which He works through each individual.¹⁰

Thus, Paul, in concert with assembled elders in Timothy’s home congregation, recognised and affirmed the particular work of the Holy Spirit as He equipped Timothy to accompany Paul and later to provide oversight of the congregation in Ephesus. In similar fashion, each time a congregation witnesses the out-working of the Spirit of God as He equips an individual for a particular work, and as that assembly then affirms that work through prayer and fasting with laying on of hands, they are doing the same thing of which Paul is writing in this letter. It is less a matter of formality than it is a practical matter. It is preservation of apostolic practise without appeal to apostolic succession. It is, if you will, doctrinal succession, which is quite a different matter from ritual succession.

KEEP THE FLAME BURNING — “Fan into flame...” I did pass by the infinitive that precedes the information we have just considered. In part, I did so because the presence of this implied command presents a problem for expositors. The meaning of the word Paul used is clear, but the implications are often obscured. He commands Timothy to “fan into flame” the Holy Spirit of God. The Greek verb [*anazopurēō*] speaks of revitalising or rekindling; we might even speak of reactivating.¹¹ The word is a hapax legomenon, occurring only here in the New Testament, though it is witnessed a few times in the Septuagint¹² and in the writings of the apostolic fathers.¹³ It is a compound word composed of words meaning “again” and “kindle a fire.”

The verb is present tense, indicating that this particular action must be performed repeatedly. Literally, Paul is urging Timothy to keep on rekindling the fire. Perhaps we could say, “Keep the flame burning” or “Don’t let the flame die down.” The point is that this action must be continually addressed if Timothy is to fulfil what the Apostle is calling for him to do.

The problem for exegetes is the thought that the Spirit of God is a commodity that can be reactivated or revitalised. The Holy Spirit cannot be kindled like a fire. We are uncomfortable, and rightly so, at the mere suggestion that God can be affected by human action. God the Spirit is sovereign. Jesus said, “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” [**JOHN 3:8**]. The Spirit of God does as He pleases and no man can stay His hand; and yet the Holy Spirit is a Person. He is relational and He has condescended to associate with us relationally. As we respond to Him, He reciprocates with us. “Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you” [**JAMES 4:8a**]. God places the responsibility of moral choice upon us and expects us to use that capacity to cultivate a warm, intimate relationship of love and obedience with him.

¹⁰ For an extended study of this point, see John A. Kitchen, **The Pastoral Epistles for Pastors** (Kress Christian Publications, The Woodlands, TX 2009) 311-312

¹¹ James Swanson, **Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Greek (New Testament)** 1997; Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, **Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains**, 1996

¹² Greek version of the Old Testament Scriptures; see **GENESIS 45:27**; **1 MACCABEES 13:7**

¹³ See Michael William Holmes, **The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations** (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI 1999) 58, 136

God does not take back His Holy Spirit whom He has given to His child; but the Spirit of God must be allowed to work or His presence will become less effective. The flame will cease burning brightly if the child of God grows careless. It is not that the Spirit is incapable of working, but the one in whom the Spirit resides can stifle His working. Moreover, this tamping down of the Spirit's powerful work can occur even in those in positions of leadership such as Timothy. In his First Letter to the Thessalonians the Apostle warned, "Do not quench the Spirit" [1 THESSALONIANS 5:19]. The admonition is similar to that delivered in the Ephesian Letter. "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption" [EPHESIANS 4:30]. It is obvious, then, that a Christian, even a believer who is providing leadership in the congregation of the Lord, can restrict or suppress the work of the Spirit.

I do not consider that Paul is implying that Timothy's faith is beginning to flag or that he is growing cold; rather, since this will be Paul's final missive, I see the Apostle's words as a call for Timothy to give full attention to ensure that the Spirit of God is allowed to work effectively in his life. Paul had just spoken of Timothy's faith in the preceding verses; therefore, it is best for us to understand that Paul is now urging the younger preacher to maximise the potential of the Spirit of God as He works out His ministry through Timothy's life.

The same admonition is necessary for each of us. God gives His Spirit, graciously calling us to work together with Him in the advancing His Kingdom. For this reason, the Apostle will speak of believers as fellow workers with God [see 1 CORINTHIANS 3:9]. Paul is using the metaphor of a fire because it speaks a great truth. A fire that has gone out cannot be stoked; it is extinguished and cannot be rekindled from the previous flame. However, even a smouldering fire can be rekindled from the former flame. What is true of fires is true of service to God. If there is no spark, ministry cannot be rekindled as there was no spark to begin with. However, the fuel sometimes nears exhaustion or the oxygen flow is restricted, and the flame of passion for the glory of God must be rekindled through supplying fresh fuel and/or oxygen.

"Use it or lose it" is a phrase that is sometimes heard in western culture. Whenever we hear someone say those words, we know precisely what is meant. You must use your muscles, or they will cease to function as they should. You must use your mind or the ability to think clearly will be lost. If you speak a foreign language, you must use that language, or you will lose the ability to speak the language. The same holds true in the realm of the Spirit, without exercise, the outworking of the Holy Spirit will grow flaccid, flabby, weak. This is a practical demonstration of the truth of Jesus' statement, "To everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away" [MATTHEW 25:29]. The Spirit of God implies a dynamic gift and not that which is static. He is always at work; and His work through us will be evident so long as we do not stifle that work. The presence of God's Spirit does not mean that He works automatically in our lives; we must allow Him to work through us.

The people of God, and especially the man of God, must keep fanning the flame, must ensure that there are no restrictions on oxygen for the fires of the heart, must ensure that there is adequate fuel to ensure a bright, continually burning flame. The careless Christian is liable to quench the Spirit; but through watchfulness and diligence, the believer will ensure that the flame continues to burn brightly. The Apostle's call urges those who bear the Name of Christ to ensure that the fire burns brightly at all times. Peter encourages Christians along identical lines. He writes, "In your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect" [1 PETER 3:15].

I have deep concerns about the spiritual condition of the churches in our day, and especially am I concerned for our own congregation. Surveying the state of the churches, I must confess that there is evidence that holy fire glows dimly among the churches of this day; and I fear the fire of holy zeal is dying down even among us. We Christians are generally religious, but we are not particularly effective. I'm speaking quite broadly; nevertheless, we Christians appear more concerned for partisan and sectarian positions than for the glory of the Lord God. We Christians appear more intent on promoting our personal interests than we are about advancing the cause of Christ the Lord. We Christians have become adept at speaking ill of other believers, and we have grown overly comfortable in advancing our own interests.

Surely the Spirit is grieved with the condition of His churches. Surely the Lord God weeps at the lack of zeal to declare His holy Name among His people. Surely Christ the Lord is dismayed at the failure of His people to exalt His Name. We have no right to speak ill of other saints if we ourselves are not winning lost people to the Faith and if we are failing to penetrate the darkness with light. We have no right to dismiss fellow Christians if we are not weeping over the lost world in which we live.

The world moves steadily toward destruction and our neighbours are dying in their sin; and we, the people of God, have become quiescent; it is as though we imagine that the Spirit of God is now dormant or perhaps even hibernating. Christians within the churches go through the motions—singing, reciting prayers, attending meetings—before returning to humdrum, pedestrian routines. We speak of the terrible state of affairs in our world and bemoan the loss of righteousness; yet we cannot bring ourselves to set aside time to pray for God to empower us or to stand with His persecuted people.

There are glowing embers in the heart of each Christian. With the Apostle I urge each of you who hear my voice, “Fan into flame the gift of God which is in you.” Begin to fan the flame; if fuel is required—knowledge of the Word, time alone with God, time invested in prayer—add it now. Keep fanning the flame until it again burns brightly. And as you fan the flame, pray for me that I will preach as I ought and that I will do the first things.

I have often thought with genuine trepidation that the words of the Risen Christ to the Church in Ephesus apply to us. You recall that through John, He whose eyes are a flame of fire said, “I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name’s sake, and you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent”

[REVELATION 2:2-5].

May God graciously encourage His people; and may we fan the flame. Amen.