

The Quenching and Grieving of the Holy Spirit

A Short Discussion

by

G. H. Shinn

Introduction

Confusion abounds among Christians about the differences between quenching the Holy Spirit and the grieving of the Holy Spirit. Besides the fact that the words quench and grieve mean two different things, there are contextual differences in the passages in which they are used.

It is the purpose of this short paper to present information to clear up at least some of the difficulty in understanding the two words, and how they are used by Paul in his epistles. While much more can and should be said about these two passages, as well as the words themselves, this brief paper may bring encouragement to those who have some confusion about the issues involved.

The Meaning of the Words

Quench

The Greek verb translated quench is σβέννυμι (*sbennumi*). It occurs eight times in the Greek New Testament. It is used directly with the word fire in 5 of the times it is used, and the word fire is implied in another two. Only in 1 Thessalonians 5:19 is it used of quenching the Holy Spirit. The metaphor is obvious. The Spirit is compared to fire, the only place in the New Testament where such a comparison is used. The Spirit can be quenched as though He were a fire.

In what sense is the Holy Spirit quenched. Clearly, the Holy Spirit cannot be extinguished literally. But the probable meaning in the context is, as we shall see below, the hindering of the Spirit to the point of causing Him to stop acting in certain areas.

Do not think of quenching the Spirit as forcing Him to do anything. He stops acting based on His own righteous determinative will, not because some human activity forces Him to do so. In other words, He renders Himself to cease a specific activity.

Grieve

The verb translated grieve is λυπέω. It occurs 26 times in the Greek New Testament. The basic meaning of the word is to cause sorrow, but it usually means simply to be sorrowful in its New Testament uses. It is clearly a word which is based on the human emotion, but is used as a figure of speech in Ephesians 4:30 called anthropopathy, which is the giving of human feelings to God. God certainly does not grieve in the uncontrolled human sense. While human emotions come and go capriciously, not so with God's comparative emotions. Similarly to quenching, when the Holy Spirit grieves, it is because He decides to be sorrowful in a perfect, divine sort of way.

However, unlike the quenching of the Holy Spirit, the grieving of the Spirit does not render Himself to cease an activity. He simply decides to exercise divine sorrow because of the actions of the individual.

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The Contextual Uses

The Quenching of the Holy Spirit – 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

12 And we request of you, brethren, to recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, 13 and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. Be at peace among yourselves.

*14 Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all. 15 See that no one renders evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good both for yourselves and for all. 16 Rejoice always, 17 pray without ceasing, 18 in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. 19 **Do not quench the Spirit.** 20 Do not despise prophecies. 21 Test all things; hold fast what is good. 22 Abstain from every form of evil.*

23 Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it. 25 Brethren, pray for us. 26 Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss. 27 I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read to all the holy brethren. 28 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen.

The above passage, 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28 is usually presented in paragraph Bibles as a single long paragraph. Note that I have divided it into three paragraphs. This is because in analyzing the discourse it seems obvious that two different groups of people are being addressed.

Verse 12 begins with the vocative statement, “And we request of you, brethren, to recognize those who labor among you...” This is clearly directed to the entire assembly of believers in Thessalonica. Paul asks the believers to do something from the point of view of his shared brotherhood with them. We know this because he uses the word ἐρωτάω, which we have translated request. This word is often confused with another word translated ask, αἰτέω. Generally speaking, αἰτέω refers to the act of asking of a superior, while ἐρωτάω refers to the act of requesting an equal.

R. C. Trench in his *Synonyms of the New Testament* correctly distinguishes these two words: “*Aiteo* is the more submissive and suppliant term. It is consistently used of an inferior’s seeking something from a superior.... In classical Greek *erotao*...means...‘to interrogate’ or ‘to inquire....’ It is noteworthy that Jesus never used [*aiteo*]...to refer to himself on behalf of his disciples, for his is not the *petition* of the creature to the Creator, but the *request* of the Son to the Father.”

The Lord Jesus Christ, when requesting of the Father, always uses ἐρωτάω. Sadly, in the KJV it is sometimes translated “pray,” which greatly confuses the issue. In John 17, for instance, ἐρωτάω is translated pray in many if not most versions. But the actual Greek words correctly translated pray and prayer cannot be found in John 17. In fact, they do not occur anywhere in John’s Gospel. One must look in the Synoptic Gospels to find instance of the Lord’s praying.

In simple terms, then, αἰτέω refers to one asking a superior, while ἐρωτάω refers to making request of an equal, as Jesus does to the Father in John 17.

What, then, is the significance of Paul using ἐρωτάω in 1 Thessalonians 5:12? Since he addresses the brethren as equals, it is consistent with his use of this word when addressing the entire assembly. Furthermore, he encourages them concerning their leadership, that is, “those who labor among you.” He cannot be addressing the leadership, at least, not directly. He must be addressing the assembly at large.

But note that in vs. 14 Paul again uses a vocative of direct address with the words, “Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all.” He continues the exhortations in the following verses. It seems clear that he is not addressing the

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entire assembly, but the assembly leadership, the ones who he has previously identified as “those who labor among you.” It would be inappropriate for Paul to encourage the assembly in general to warn the unruly, etc. This is a leadership function, as are the rest of the exhortations through vs. 21. That is not to say that *some* of these exhortations could not be given to the assembly at large, but for some reason, possibly because of a lack among the leadership in these areas, he addresses specific exhortations to the limited group who are responsible for the assembly in a variety of ways, that is, the elder leadership.¹

Within this group of exhortations we find the statement concerning quenching the Spirit. How specific this exhortation is has occasioned much discussion. However, one specific view that has much to commend it is that Paul recognized that some leaders were not allowing free expression of the believer’s spiritual gifts in the assembly. The very next exhortation after not quenching the Spirit, “Do not despise prophecies,” probably speaks to this very problem. At the time of the New Testament writings, the gift of prophecy was still active. That gift is no longer available today (see this teacher’s explanation of the temporary nature of the gift of prophecy in his paper on spiritual gifts), does not mean that it was not operating in Paul’s day. And it seemed that some did not approve of some of the prophecies being given, and perhaps tried to shut the prophet(s) down.

There can be a tendency among the leadership of a local assembly to “lord it over the lots” (see the Greek statement of 1 Peter 5:1-3, especially vs. 3). This may have been going on in the Thessalonian assembly.

At any rate, it seems that quenching the Spirit in this case probably has to do with causing certain gifted individuals from performing their ministry. This may not refer directly to the assembly time, but to the practice of the gift of prophecy in general.

Some have suggested that the word “spirit” here is not referring to the Holy Spirit at all, but to the human spirit which would be active in personal ministry. While this interpretation is by no means certain, it is a fact that some local assemblies leaders do, in fact, oppress those who desire to minister as individuals. They are told not to minister unless it is an “authorized” ministry. No home Bible studies! No visitation unless having the pastor’s permission! No unauthorized assembly! These may sound extreme to some with limited experience in modern churches, but I assure you that these kinds of things, and many more, do occur.

Quenching the Spirit is most probably the result of the act of a leader in a local church exercising undue control over the flock. Whether it is the Spirit Himself who is induced to cease His activity because of over control of the individual believer, or the spirit of that believer that is quenched, oppressive behavior by church leadership can be an ungodly blight on the local assembly of today as it was at the time of the apostles.

The Grieving of the Holy Spirit – Ephesians 4:25-32

25 Therefore, having put off the lie, Let each person speak truth with his neighbor,² because we are all members of one another. ²⁶ Be wrathful and do not sin.³ Do not let the sun set on your wrath, ²⁷ nor give place to the devil. ²⁸ Let the one who steals no longer steal, but rather let him labor, working with his hands the good thing, in order that he

1 Verse 23 begins a short paragraph that is again addressed to the entire assembly. It is, in fact, a benediction to the whole epistle, and is therefore addressed not to the leadership alone, but to all in the Thessalonian assembly who read Paul’s letter.

2 Zechariah 8:16.

3 Psalm 4:4.

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might have something to share with the one who has need. ²⁹ *Do not let any harmful word come forth out of your mouth, but let come forth any good word for building up of that which is needed, in order that it might give grace to the ones who hear.* ³⁰ **And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God by Whom you were sealed unto the day of redemption.** ³¹ *Let all bitterness and anger and wrath and clamor and blasphemy be removed from you, together with all malice.* ³² *And be kind people to one another; compassionate people, forgiving one another; just as God in Christ also forgave you.*

As noted above, the word grieve has to do with feelings of sorrow. We find the grieving of the Spirit in the context of Ephesians 4:25-32. The Epistle to the Ephesians was written by Paul to an assembly that he knew well. He had spent almost three years in Ephesus as his headquarters while he ministered in proconsular Asia. These people knew Bible doctrine as well as any, yet Paul found the need to address certain problems that were either already in their midst, or that were potential problems because of new believers coming in. Even so, of all of Paul's epistles, that to the Ephesians assumes a basic background in Paul's teaching.

The statement about grieving the Holy Spirit in verse 30 is preceded by a series of imperatives designed to inform the believers in Ephesus of these real or potential problems. The quality of these problems all seem to stem from Satanic attack (vs. 27). Few appear to be works of the flesh (It appears that vs. 31 speaks of a some such). Undoubtedly, during his tenure in the city, Paul had taught Ephesians about overcoming the flesh, to the extent that he did not need to spend much of the epistle discussing the solution to that problem. But it seems that some believers in the assembly were succumbing to Satanic influences, and to some works of the flesh.

We say this is probable because Paul's imperative in vs. 30 is in the present tense. It implies an on-going problem, and probably is best understood as "Do not go on grieving the Holy Spirit." It would appear then, that any unrighteous act of a Christian has the potential of grieving the Holy Spirit, no matter what the source of the temptation. When God's grace has made it unnecessary to continue in sin, it is no wonder that the individual person of the Trinity who indwells the believer today would be grieved when sin occurs. Such sinful acts cause anticipated sorrow because the ministry of Spirit control over the flesh is being neglected, and the Spirit's application of truth about Satanic attack is being ignored.

Unlike quenching the Spirit, grieving the Spirit seems to be much broader based. Any unrighteous act can bring it about, and the command to stop doing so is based on Paul's teaching concerning the grace provisions he had presented to the Ephesians will with them.