

Aim of lesson

The aim of this lesson is for the young people to appreciate that in our relationship with God, spiritual experience is not a substitute for understanding, and for them to be prepared to respond when meeting those who will place great emphasis on the apparent working of the gifts of the spirit.

It is important that we keep these aims clear in our mind. It is no part of our aim to try to limit what God may choose to do through his spirit, nor to give the impression that God no longer answers prayer, sometimes in miraculous ways.

Whenever dealing with others we do well to keep in the back of our minds the words of Gamaliel: 'If their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.' (Acts 5:38-39). It is good to give the young people a clear understanding that the scriptures are our only authority, but try to avoid a suggestion that 'We are right about everything because we are Christadelphians, and everyone else is wrong about everything because they are not'. It is not we who are right, but the scriptures in which we believe.

Bible background

John 14, 15 and 16; 1 Corinthians 12, 13 and 14.

Preparation required

It is important that you prepare this subject for yourself, working through the notes and making sure that you understand the points that you want to make. There may be other points that are relevant to the group you are teaching, and you should think about these in addition to, or instead of, some of the contents of the notes.

Suggested outline of lesson

This lesson deals with three main topics:

1. The holy spirit as the third person of the trinity
2. The belief that the holy spirit has guided the church in the development of its doctrines.
3. The claims of many to experience gifts of the spirit, in particular speaking with tongues and healing.

The third person of the trinity?

Is it true that the holy spirit is described as a person?

English is an unusual language in that we do not have genders for inanimate objects; there is only one definite article – ‘the’, which is used for everything. We have the pronouns ‘he’ and ‘she’ to refer to people and some animals and things, but we use ‘it’ for everything else.

Other languages are different. In French, for example, all nouns are either masculine or feminine, whereas in German they may be masculine (der Bahnhof – the station), feminine (die Kirche – the church), or neuter (das Fahrrad – the bicycle). Greek is like German, with three genders.

The fact that the comforter in the gospel of John is a masculine noun should not therefore be used to argue that the holy spirit is a person, any more than a German railway station is. Even if this line of argument were to be valid, it would be confounded by the fact that ruach is feminine and pneuma neuter.

The sort of conclusion the young people should be coming to is that there is no scriptural basis for building the doctrine that the holy spirit is a third member of a trinity.

Has the holy spirit guided the church in the development of its doctrines?

This is a fairly straightforward section, and the answer is ‘no’. The Roman Catholic church claims to be guided by the spirit in its pronouncements on doctrine (see the examples in the students’ notes), but given that so much of its teaching is manifestly erroneous, this is simply untenable. If the most successful (numerically at least) Christian denomination can deceive itself and others in this way, we should be extremely cautious of the claims of anyone else.

The only safe way is to trust the scriptures God has given us, and to mistrust anything that is not clearly taught there.

An aside

1 Corinthians 13:8-12 is not referred to in the students’ notes, but is sometimes used, in particular by Jehovah’s Witnesses, to argue that the holy spirit gifts ceased in the first century.

Whilst it appears to be an observable fact that the miraculous gifts of the spirit did cease, it seems rather tenuous to use this passage in this way. The point that Paul is making is that the time will come, in the kingdom, when he would know and understand everything fully; for now, he had to be content with a partial understanding: even the holy spirit had not led him to comprehend everything.

Speaking in tongues

Look at 1 Corinthians 12:28-13:2, and make the point that even in the first century, when these things were so important in the establishment of the church, the value of speaking in tongues was kept in proportion. In Paul's list of the spirit gifts, speaking in tongues comes last.

Now look at 1 Corinthians 14 and review the chapter as a whole.

It is not clear whether this chapter is referring to speaking other languages or speaking in sounds which could only be interpreted by one who had the gift of interpretation. If anything verse 10 and the use in verse 21 of the quotation from Isaiah 28:11-12, would suggest that real languages were being referred to. The main point is that if nobody understands what is being said all this communication is of no value.

It is clear from the letters to Corinth that speaking in tongues was no guarantee of doctrinal correctness. The church was full of serious doctrinal and moral problems, which Paul was at pains to address. So the important conclusion is reached that, as a spirit gift, it was not really relevant to their salvation or to their spiritual health.

That should be our attitude to the subject. Speaking in tongues does not prove that someone is right in their faith or teaching; nor (this is an important point to be clear on) does it of itself prove that they are wrong. It is to the scriptures that we should turn.

Speaking in tongues is not only a Christian phenomenon

This is simply an observable fact, and the quotation from the encyclopaedia illustrates it.

Healing

Can we still expect that God will answer prayers to heal the sick?

It is important that you discuss this point with the young people and bring to their minds such passages as those listed in their notes. We are not doubting for one moment that God's miraculous powers are still at his disposal, nor that he uses them when it is his will. The point is whether, as in the first century, God puts this power to some extent under the control of individuals who are able to determine how it will be used.

Do not be afraid of discussing with the young people the fact that there do seem to be individuals with powers that we perhaps cannot explain by entirely natural means. These powers are claimed by all cultures and societies, godless as well as religious. As with speaking in tongues, it is therefore not conclusive that the power of God is at work when people claim them as Christian. A good point of reference for this would be the magicians in Egypt, or the witch of Endor.

You may like to refer to passages like Isaiah 44:3, Ezekiel 39:29 and Joel 2:28-29, which speak of the spirit being poured out in the future on the restored people of Israel.

Relevance to our lives

We need to beware of two extremes. On the one hand we may come to think that God no longer works in the lives of his people, and may be like those of whom Paul warned Timothy, who had a form of godliness, but denied its power. On the other hand there is the danger is that we will delude ourselves into thinking that our own wishes and thoughts are the will of God.

In the middle is a balanced view which recognises that God will guide those who are willing to submit themselves to him, and who therefore make every effort to understand his will and to follow it. He takes us by the hand so that he can lead us, not we him.

Prayer

Dear Lord God, it is your wish, and it is ours, that we may be guided to understand your will and to follow it. Give us humility to accept your guidance, and wisdom to discern your will. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

Other suggestions for activities

1. If any of the young people has met someone who claims to be guided directly by the holy spirit, or to have any of its gifts such as speaking in tongues, you may like to have a 'debate' about the merits of what they have to say.
2. Alternatively there may be someone in your ecclesia in this position, whom you could invite to discuss this point in more detail with the young people.