

Selections from 1 Corinthians 12-14
(Psalm 133; John 17:20-23)
“Five Distinguishing Marks of the Holy Spirit’s Presence”

Introduction

The twentieth century, recently ended, was marked by unprecedented scientific and technological development. It opened with people traveling on foot or horseback, and ended with trips to the moon having become passé. It is remarkable, therefore, that the greatest growth in the church worldwide was not in those churches that sought to accommodate the new, scientific spirit, but rather in those that sought the power of the Holy Spirit as poured out at Pentecost.

This Pentecostal and charismatic growth has been so phenomenal that church historians are already making predictions about this present, third millennium. They speak of the “first church” as the church of the first millennium, marked by the theological dominance of the East, and of the “second church” of the second millennium, marked by the theological dominance of the West. Now they observe the emergence of what they call the “third church,” the church of the South, growing most rapidly in South America, Asia and Africa. This church is marked by a powerful experience of the reality of Pentecost. If you have had the opportunity to worship in parts of this church, you will know what I mean. There is an intensity of worship, a sense of the presence and power of God, a strong faith in the continuing work of the Holy Spirit in signs and wonders. What one sees is very much like what one reads of in the book of Acts and in the great revivals that once swept the Western Church, but that seem to have passed us by.

However, many in our country claim that revival is sweeping America, too. They point to the rapid growth of some congregations, and to the signs and wonders movement in its various forms. However, when one studies the history of revival, it is clear that a true revival transforms an entire community, and – if it grows into a great awakening – it transforms an entire nation. No one can seriously suggest that our country is undergoing a biblical reformation. Yet, there *is* such a thing as local revival. All revival starts that way. How are we to distinguish it? How, if we attend a church where a lot of good things seem to be happening, are we to know whether it is a work of the Spirit of God, or just the work of men?

In our text, Paul comes to the heart of his first Corinthian letter, to the problem that was tearing them apart, and he spends three chapters addressing it. It concerned the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and particularly the use of the gift of tongues in worship. What I hope to do this morning, in preparation for next Sunday’s celebration of Pentecost, is simply preview these three chapters, noting five distinguishing marks of a work of the Holy Spirit. Whoever you are, wherever you go to church, wherever your travels take you, the apostle Paul gives us here five unerring marks by which to test a church or movement to see whether it is the work of God or of men.

Body

1. A true work of the Holy Spirit is Christ-centered (12:1-3):

Anything else turns quickly to mere religion. This is the crucial difference between a truly Christian ecumenism and interfaith discussions. The one is incumbent upon us in seeking to fulfill Jesus' high-priestly prayer (John 17); the other is simply part of living peaceably together in the same society. However, many who are the fiercest opponents of ecumenism, believing it to endanger true biblical Christianity, are unwittingly denying the faith in their preaching and worship.

Illus: Those who preach topically on helpful themes, without centering everything in the biblical witness to Jesus Christ, even those who emphasize the work of the Holy Spirit without centering the message on Christ.

2. A true work of the Holy Spirit is distinguished by both unity and diversity (12:4-31):

It is crucial that a church be clear about what we have been given in common (one body, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all -- see Eph 4:4f), and about what is given uniquely to individual believers (the gifts of the Spirit). When either unity or diversity is emphasized to the exclusion of the other, a sort of spiritual vertigo results.

Illus: Overemphasis on unity results in legalism, loss of freedom, quenching of gifts. Overemphasis on freedom results in disorder, disunity, and division.

3. A true work of the Holy Spirit is distinguished both by the fruit of the Spirit and by the gifts of the Spirit (13:1-13):

We tend to be most impressed by the Spirit's gifts, especially the "up-front" gifts that draw attention to the person using them. So, we think that our teachers, preachers, evangelists, leaders are automatically our most spiritual people. This was at the heart of the problem in Corinth: The more demonstrative the gift, the greater the assumed level of spirituality. Not necessarily, says Paul. Spiritual maturity is judged, not by gifts, but by fruit. This is the meaning of the well known, but frequently misunderstood, thirteenth chapter. Love is not the highest gift, but rather the number-one fruit of the Spirit. However, as Paul makes clear, the gifts are not to be despised. Both are necessary. Just as a work of the Spirit values unity and diversity, so too it demonstrates both the fruit and gifts of the Spirit.

Illus: Overemphasis on gifts results in unloving one-upmanship, and leaders falling into scandalous sin. Overemphasis on fruit leads to a sort of quietist pietism that refuses to engage the church and the world in active ministry, and results in the withering through disuse of the gifts of the Spirit, and so leads to a sick church and society.

4. A true work of the Holy Spirit is distinguished by clarity rather than confusion (14:1-25):

One of the charges brought against the great revivals of history is that they led to confusion and disorder. But, in these final two distinguishing marks, Paul says that the opposite should be true. This is why he says that, in public worship, he would rather speak five intelligible words than ten thousand words in tongues (14:19). He emphasizes teaching, preaching, and proclamation over tongues, because clarity communicates the message of the gospel. He does not put down tongues, but simply says that they are not so much for public worship as for private edification.

5. A true work of the Holy Spirit is distinguished by order rather than disorder (14:26-40):

It is the Spirit of God who ordered this cosmos to run by discoverable and measurable laws, and who in saving us brings order to the chaos of our lives. How shall he not bring order to our worship? There is in biblical worship a beautiful balance between form and freedom. When one is preeminent, either chaos reigns, or the service is marked by spiritual deadness.