

Selections from 1 Corinthians 12-14
(John 17:20-23)
“Recognizing God’s Spirit at Work”

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 has been in those churches that pursue the ancient path of studying God’s Word and experiencing God’s Spirit.

This Word and Spirit centered 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 “third” church of the global South is certainly marked by openness to the power and reality of Pentecost. If you have had the opportunity to worship in such parts of the church, you know what I mean. There is an intensity of worship, a sense of the presence and power of God, a strong sense of the church’s need of the continuing work of the Holy Spirit.

However, I must also say, as one who travels frequently and sees much of what purports to be a mighty movement of God’s Spirit, there is also much that manifests great excitement, and that makes great claims, but that is torn by division and marked by scandal. The largest and best known of these congregations seem periodically to come, one after another, into the news for the worst of reasons.

So, how are we to distinguish mere religious excitement from a true work of the Holy Spirit of God? How, if we attend a church where a many good things seem to be happening, can we tell whether it is a work of the Spirit of God, or just the result of human programming and clever advertizing?

In our text, Paul comes to the heart of this letter, to the most insidious problem tearing the Corinthian congregation apart, and he spends three chapters addressing it. The problem addressed here concerns the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the pride of those exercising the gift of tongues and their elevation of that gift as the supreme mark of spiritual maturity. In response, Paul gives a very different series of marks by which to recognize whether something is merely a human work or a work of God’s Spirit.

Body

1. A work of God's Spirit is both Christ-centered and Trinitarian (12:1-7).

When Paul writes, "I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says, 'Jesus is accursed!' and no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except in the Holy Spirit" (12:3), his point is not that certain words can or cannot be spoken but rather that this confession of Jesus' Lordship will only be made by one who has been born of the Spirit. Paul may be looking back on his own past days of believing Jesus to be a liar and blasphemer. He may be referring to the annual requirement that people demonstrate their allegiance to Rome by worshiping at the Caesar cult and publically proclaiming, "Caesar is Lord."

But the key is this: He first wants to remind a congregation, one that is fighting over evidences of the Holy Spirit's presence and power, that the first mark of the Holy Spirit's work is the confession that Jesus is Lord, a confession that includes the ascription of divinity to Jesus, for he speaks of Jesus' Lordship in ways that a first century Jew would only speak of God himself.

Often missed in these verses is the Trinitarian shape of verses 4-6: "the same Spirit ... the same Lord [Jesus] ... the same God [the Father]." While it would be over a century before the word "Trinity" was used to describe the New Testament teaching about God, we have here a description of the multi-personal One God of Scripture. Paul seems to be pointing to the nature of God as encompassing both unity and diversity to prepare for his next point.

2. A work of God's Spirit manifests both unity and diversity (12:8-31).

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

3. A work of God's Spirit manifests both the fruit and 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 may think that our teachers, preachers, evangelists and 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 evidenced, not by the gifts, but by the fruit of the Spirit.

This is the meaning of the well known, but frequently misunderstood, thirteenth chapter. Love is not, as is often thought and taught, the highest gift, but rather the central fruit of the Spirit from which all the rest grow. 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.

Overemphasis on gifts results in unloving one-upmanship and, too often, in 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. The key is that the gifts are given, not for one's self, to boost one's pride, but rather to be given away in self-sacrificial service of others

4. A work of God's Spirit leads to 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 a tongue that the congregation did not understand (14:19). He emphasizes teaching, preaching, and proclamation over tongues, because clarity communicates the message of the gospel. And when revivals follow this pattern of clarity, they lead to reformation.

5. A work of God's Spirit leads to order rather than disorder (14:26-40).

It is the Spirit of God who created a cosmos that runs 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 only one is preeminent, either chaos reigns, or the service is marked by spiritual deadness.

Conclusion

Why would we be afraid of a mighty outpouring of God's Spirit, who brings to us the kind of beautiful balance in life and worship that we have always longed to know? So recognize the Spirit's work by the evidence of self-sacrificial love and self-effacing service, as Christ again takes flesh and walks the earth through his people.