

**PASTORAL PRAYER:** Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on us; Break us; Melt us; Mold us; Use us. O Divine Spirit that brooded over the waters at creation, we often forget that we are one in the Spirit and that our differences are what enrich us. We become so engaged in sorting ourselves into categories that we become unnecessarily divided. Walls limit our relationships here and with others. Help us to realize that we all are striving to fulfill the same spiritual needs and that not the correctness of our doctrine, or of our liturgy, or of our methods of serving and following; rather, it is this common yearning and striving that unites us in Christ. Forgive us our fragmentation and make us whole.

Help us to recognize and accept the uniqueness of each gift given to us in Christ, and grant us the understanding that the difference between the drudgery of "doing church work", and the sense of fulfillment and energy that comes from participating in the "Work of the Church", is the recognition, acceptance and application of your gifts of service.

We would be about the "Work of Your Church," in the power of the Holy Spirit and in the name of Jesus, who taught us, when we pray, to say...

## **PENTECOST: FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY**

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Before many of you were born, I wrote a research paper for Dr. Fred Craddock on "The Spiritual Foundations of the Church in Corinth". Each year, around Pentecost, I'd recall that paper, but I could never find it. Guess what. I found it. It wasn't as good as I remembered, and academic papers seldom make good sermons; however, some of Dr. Craddock's hand-written comments in the margins sent me scurrying back to the biblical text that inspired the paper and, the process, I've discovered some good hooks on which to hang a sermon. Here is the text:

### **1 CORINTHIANS 12:1-13**

*"Now about spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant."* Paul understood fully why the Corinthians would be "ignorant:" they were recent converts from paganism. Those pagan religions had rituals of initiation similar to Christian baptism. They had a kind of communion meal (I Cor. 10), worship, prayer, prophecy, ecstasy, speaking in tongues...

Thirty miles north in Delphi was the Temple of Apollo. The Pythia, which is what the high priestess was called, sat on a three-legged stool over a crack in the earth, and inhaled fumes until her speech became distorted. That distorted speech was thought to be the voice of the gods, and was called, "The Oracle". There are different theories about the fumes. Some say it was ethylene gas; some say it was methane. I've wondered if it were helium. You've probably seen people inhale helium from a balloon; it makes them sound like Donald Duck when they talk.

These pagan religions had a lot of ceremonies and practices that were meaningful to them, and many of those who converted to Christianity wanted to know, "Can we continue to observe these spiritual practices, now that we are Christian?" In the margin, Dr. Craddock wrote, "Habits and customs of long standing are not easily broken, no matter how deep the water at one's baptism."

Paul knew the background of these Greek Christians, but he didn't present an analysis of spiritual phenomenon. He didn't distinguish between having a spiritual experience and merely thinking you have. He didn't raise the sociological question of why ecstatic religious movements usually are urban rather than rural, mainly among the leisure class, attracting far more women than men. His epistle is not an academic paper on comparative religions, pointing out similarities and differences in how various religions around the world handle spiritual ecstasy and ecstatic speech.

Paul's concern is simply this: are the ecstatic experiences Christian? That's not the same as asking if they really happened. To say someone really had a vision, or really spoke in tongues begs the question. The magicians in Egypt matched Moses miracle for miracle. Simon the sorcerer amazed the Samaritans with acts of extraordinary power.

Dr. Craddock's marginal note said, "There is nothing genuine that does not have its counterfeit; no movement so Christian but what it has its pornographers." We can reel off the names: David Koresh, Jim Jones, Tony Alamo... The question of the Corinthians is our question, and it is the church's question.

And it is the question of our culture, devouring books on parapsychology, ESP, re-incarnation, astrology, extra-terrestrial beings, the occult, the apocalyptic... Good or bad, these are spiritual issues. And notice the kinds of video games our children and youth like to play: games with demons and magic and walking dead. I don't know if this fascination with the paranormal is a reaction to a collapsed idealism or a mushrooming narcissism, or whether we're on the brink of a new reformation. What I do know, and so do you, is that when the speaker says, "And now concerning spiritual things," large crowds grow quiet and listen attentively.

So, while it's unwise to embrace every act that seems deeply spiritual, it's just as unwise to try to squelch all expressions of the spiritual. Apparently, some members of the church in Thessalonika tried that, but Paul advised: "*Don't quench the Spirit nor despise prophecy, but test everything*" (I THESS. 5:19-22). John's first epistle counsels: "*Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.*" (1JO 4:1 NIV)

On this Pentecost Sunday, how do we test the spirits? If Paul's desire is not to cut off spiritual expression, but to channel it, how does he do that? His initial criteria are two: one negative and one positive.

**The negative** is this: "*No one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says, 'Jesus be cursed.'*" (vs. 3) In the margin of my paper, Dr. Craddock asked why I avoided this part. It still is perplexing to me. To begin with, "How is this statement even relevant in a Christian context; much less to claim that it was inspired by the Holy Spirit?" But, apparently, it had happened in the Church in Corinth. Maybe it was just meaningless chatter, a burst of nonsense uttered in the intoxication of spiritual ecstasy. Or maybe there was a rule of thumb that said: "The more absurd, the more spiritual!"

But, more likely, the cry came from Gnosticism—one of the first major heresies in Christianity. The Gnostics said Jesus wasn't really human; he just appeared to be human. He was just an apparition—a phantom. His feet didn't touch the ground, and he didn't really die, because God can't die. Gnosticism claimed that the focus on Jesus distracted from the ultimate reality to which Jesus' life pointed, namely, the Holy Spirit. So, "Jesus be cursed!"

And there is evidence that it still exists in various forms today. It's seen in the reaction to programs that define discipleship in terms of hardship, lack of public approval, investment of time and funds which would make the church the friend of publicans and sinners.

But, what if the statement, "Jesus be cursed," was offered as a flaunting of

freedom. New freedoms want to be proven, and the proof often contains more shock than sense. In the church, freedom in the Spirit often announces itself by proclaiming a radical break with the past, with tradition, with the community. Consider today's "spiritual but not religious" break with organized religion.

But by Paul's criteria, that statement is not Christian. And too often it's an effort to control—to inflict one's own perspective as the standard for all.

Paul's second criterion for testing the spirits—**the positive one**—is "*No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit.*" It's impossible to overstate how critical this confession is for Paul. It is not necessarily Christian to say "I believe in the Lord" or "Praise the Lord!" Which Lord? In Corinth there were many Lords; many gods. What makes a confession Christian is to identify the Lord as Jesus of Nazareth. The Christ of the Christian is Jesus; the Lord of the church is Jesus. A primary function of the Gospels in the New Testament is to prevent any separation of the church's Lord from the historical person of Jesus.

The one supreme miracle of the church, the act which boggles all reason is that men and women and young people do, amid attractive alternatives, confess, "Jesus is Lord." The amazing thing is not that people **don't** believe. Given the facts of his birth, his life, his death and the unbelievable claim of his resurrection, the real miracle is that **anyone ever** believed! There is no other way to explain it; "No one can say, 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit."

Why is it important? The way you understand Christ is the way you understand discipleship: what it means to **follow** him. This may explain why some people have trouble accepting the total humanity of Jesus. Most people have no problem with the **divinity** of Christ; that's comfortable. We can use his divinity as an excuse: he was, after all, divine; I'm "only human."

But *if he's human*—if his feet touch the ground—there'll be footprints. And, if we follow those footprints—if *we're* obedient—those footprints may lead to places we don't want to go.

In Matthew, Jesus talks about some who say, "Lord, Lord," and who perform deeds that should impress a Lord: prophecy, exorcising demons, miracles. But Jesus does not know them. Why not? Casting out demons and prophesying and working miracles—that's pretty impressive! It would sure brighten some of my dull sermons!

But the Paul's point is unmistakably clear: there is an eternity of difference between those who say "Lord, Lord" and those who say "Jesus is Lord." It is not just a difference of words but of action and response. It is a difference that manifests itself most dramatically in our response to those occasions when Jesus says, "*I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, <sup>36</sup>I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.*" (Matt. 25:35-36)

**THE CALL TO STEWARDSHIP:** Whenever the Spirit of God falls upon God's people, there is worship and witness; witness that draws people to God. As we prepare the Table of the Lord with the fruits of our labors, we do so in witness to the presence of God's Spirit.

**COMMUNION MEDITATION:** At creation the Spirit of God "brooded over the waters" and brought order out of chaos and breathed into humankind the breath of life. The Spirit led Abraham and Sarah to a land God had chosen, and through them called a people to be God's own. The Spirit fell on rulers and prophets, giving them power to lead God's people. When Mary waited before the Lord, the Spirit overshadowed her, and she conceived a Son who has saved God's people from their sins. The Spirit came to this Jesus Christ who showed us life lived in its power. At Pentecost the Spirit came like the rush of a mighty wind, filling the Apostles with power from on high. Today we give thanks to that same Spirit, now present with us at this communion table, still animating God's people and brooding over this bread and wine, that with it we may receive again Christ's own life.