

“Pentecostal...Charismatic...Gifted...Called” (fn.:DOCUMENT91)

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

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Among the ecumenical Christian community, there are a variety of ways that we talk about the experience of the Holy Spirit. “Pentecostal” and “charismatic” are two of the code words for the more expressive experience of the Spirit—speaking in tongues, exuberant music, and so on. Indeed, the greatest growth of the church has been in Pentecostal congregations that populate non-Western countries—Africa and South America have fast-growing Pentecostal congregations.

For the next several Sundays, we are going to track the Apostle Paul’s understanding of the experience of the Holy Spirit in the congregation in Corinth—a congregation that highly valued such experiences as “speaking in tongues.” However, our look at the church in Corinth will keep bringing us back to this question: What does it mean to experience the Holy Spirit?

**1 Corinthians 12:1-11** *Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed.<sup>2</sup> You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak.<sup>3</sup> Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says “Let Jesus be cursed!” and no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit.*

*<sup>4</sup> Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit;<sup>5</sup> and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord;<sup>6</sup> and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.<sup>7</sup> To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.<sup>8</sup> To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit,<sup>9</sup> to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit,<sup>10</sup> to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues.<sup>11</sup> All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.*

Perhaps most of us have had that experience of staying underwater too long—either because we were held there or we were trying reach some goal like swimming the length of the pool. What takes over in us is that immense drive—a panic—for breath. Breath is vital for life.

The word “spirit” in the languages of the Bible is simply the word “breath”—*ruach* in Hebrew, *pneuma* in Greek. The Biblical understanding is that we all need “spirit” for life...more than what we call “air.” Indeed, it is often only in those personal crisis moments that we note our lack of spirit. When our world seems to hold us underwater, we have that deep, painful longing for “spirit.”

In the next several Sundays we are going explore this longing for “spirit.” And our guide will be the Apostle Paul in his letter to the church in the Greek city of Corinth. As is so often the case, in the bumbling, misbehaving congregation in Corinth, Paul provides some of his best leadership. If you define leadership by success by measurable achievements, then Paul fails miserably. If you define leadership by working through the obstacles and coping with failures, then Paul’s genius is evident.

The problem in Corinth is there are competing understandings of what it means to be spiritual—no different from today. After all, consider some of our competing spiritualities:

- I hear that expression: “I am spiritual, but not religious,” which seems to be a way of saying “Don’t lay any expectations on me—I got my life figured out.”

- I hear the expression, “All religions have the same spiritual substance—so I can try a little bit of this and little that.” A way of saying “I’ll follow what gets my attention.”
- And then there some disguised spiritualities (remembering that spirituality is what gives us life). Being a sports fan, I am regularly amazed at the length that some fans go. People are arguing about eighth-graders who should be on the Tennessee scouting radar! I just don’t live for sports in that way!
- I recently experienced Disneyworld, which substitutes the word “magic” for “spirit.” Disney wants you to have a “magical” experience. Disney does a really good job—you can live in their imaginative world. You can fly like Dumbo, enter an enchanted castle, find yourself humming “It’s a small world after all,” be entertained by talking bears, and be surrounded by the staff who are always courteous, smiling, and encouraging. There is a spirit that is being created there. By the way, when the person who complains that the church is always asking for money...try going to Disneyworld!

We in the church do not have the monopoly on spirituality—neither in the 21<sup>st</sup> century nor in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. So Paul’s guidance on spirituality continues to be helpful.

Let me be clear on a definition here: spirituality is what gives life. No breath...no life; no spirit...no life. So, without casting aspersions on the differing spiritualities, we can ask: What is Christian spirituality?

By asking the question in that way, there is already a “pointer” toward the answer. Christian spirituality is centered on Christ. Fairly basic understanding...yes, but not always evident. A few years back, I was asked to do a wedding for a college roommate. In my conversation with the bride-to-be, she kept telling me that she wanted a religious service—a deeply spiritual service—but would I please not use the words “God” or “Jesus!” Not possible for me who is seeking a Christian spirituality!

Our spirituality is Christ-centered. For Paul that means we share in Christ’s sufferings and his death.

- In other words, Paul probably would not have sung that old camp song “Every day with Jesus is sweeter than the day before.” Paul would remind the congregation in Corinth of his troubles: shipwrecks, arrests, public beatings and the like. Even though Paul would say he learned to be content in all situations, he knew some days were not “sweet.”
- Paul would not have bought into that gospel malpractice that suggests if you send dollars to support a certain television ministry, God will give you back more. Even though Paul would say that your generosity blesses you—that generosity builds you up—he would be aghast at some of the preaching of Jesus that goes on today.

And Paul would not buy into a sort of historical-tinged honoring of the Jesus of the past, like a George Washington or a Ghandi. We are not a memorial society to a past figure of history. Jesus is present with us now...in the Spirit. One central implication of the resurrection is that Jesus is not bound to the first-century A.D. Our spirituality is not so much honoring a great figure of the past as it is seeking where Jesus is now.

So, for Paul, the risen Jesus is at the heart of the spirit that gives us life. So we keep coming back around to Jesus’ ministry, to his life, to his death, to his resurrection. But there is more.

The Apostle Paul recognized that our spirituality is both gifted and tasked. Gifted...we do not own the Spirit. We do not manufacture the Spirit. We do not achieve the Spirit. Spirituality is gifted, the gift of God. There is a humbleness about this aspect of our spirituality: we are not in control of the Spirit. Neither saints nor sinners have the capacity produce spirituality. That little chorus, "Spirit of the living God," captures this well: "Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me." Spirit comes from outside us.

So, for example—sticking with theme of breath, wind, and spirit—compare spirituality to flying a kite. To fly a kite, you go and look for the wind. No amount of our running back and forth will keep that kite in sky. The wind, the breath of God, is what matters.

As a side note, location does matter. Sitting in closed room and holding your kite up to fly will not produce very good results! Location matters. And for us—for Christian spirituality—that generally involves being with others. Remember the words of Jesus—"where two or three are gathered in my name, there I will be present."

Our spirituality is gifted...and we are to seek the gift...seek the gift of spirituality, but only if you also seek the task that comes with it. Our spirituality is gifted AND tasked. That wonderful little chorus, "Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me" moves beyond "giftedness." It moves to "Make me, mold me, fill me...use me." "Use me"—there is no spirituality that is not tasked. Paul says you recognize spiritual people by their tasks—they speak words of comfort, they do acts of generosity, they cope faithfully with failure; they build up others.

Too often we have turned the giftedness of the Spirit into a privilege. So you will hear: "If you ask Jesus into your heart, then you will get to go heaven...if you have the Spirit, you have guaranteed your divine reservation." In other words, having the Spirit guarantees a privilege. So we turn spirituality into personal salvation...personal conversion. We turn spirituality into a consumer good: Have you got the Spirit?

The theologian Karl Barth made the observation that the Bible does not have stories of conversions—of personal salvation—only stories of calling. Why is that? Conversion stories are about personal deliverance; calling stories are about tasks. Even Paul, who had the astonishing "Damascus road experience," did not speak of his "conversion" but rather of his "calling." You may recall that Paul persecuted the early church. He was seeking to end what he considered the nonsense of following Jesus. And on the way to Damascus to squelch the budding Christian movement there, he meets Jesus—the risen Jesus. The risen Jesus asks Paul why he is persecuting him—persecuting Jesus. That's an interesting question because Paul was not persecuting Jesus—only his followers (but that is a matter for another Sunday—spoiler alert: how did Paul come up with the thought that the church is the body of Christ? Perhaps because the risen Jesus asked why he was persecuting him?). From that experience on the road to Damascus, Paul begins (not immediately) to shift from squelching the Christian faith to assisting in birthing the Christian faith. But Paul does not speak of this move as a "conversion" or as personal salvation. He speaks of it as a "calling." He is gifted with a task.

Authentic spirituality is not just gifted; it also tasked. That is why "conversion" language is not enough: Conversion emphasizes the change in me; calling emphasizes the task. It is like an old-order Amish farmer coming to town in his horse-drawn carriage, who—as a matter of faith—lives a plain and simple life close to the land without most modern conveniences. A street-preacher accosts

the farmer: “Are you saved, brother? Do you have the spirit of Jesus in your heart?” The old farmer ponders the question and asks the street-preacher if he has a piece of paper and pencil. A bit shocked but willing, the preacher gives the old farmer a piece of paper and pencil. The old farmer thinks, scribbles...thinks, scribbles. He then gives the paper to the street preacher. The Amish farmer says: “You ask me if I were saved...if I have the spirit of Jesus in my heart. You have there a list of people—the feed-store owner who sells me seeds, the hardware store manager where I buy tools, the butcher who helps me market my cows and pigs, the craft store clerk where my furniture is sold. Go ask them if I am saved...if I have the spirit of Jesus. I could tell you anything!”

Spirituality is a calling. And when we claim our spirituality—when say we say “Spirit, fall afresh on me”—then we are also claiming the task that comes with it. We are spiritual not for ourselves but in order that others might receive it.

One of our great Presbyterian treasures as heirs to John Calvin is this deep understanding of spirituality as being wrapped up in calling. You may know that the Latin word to call is “vocare.” And our English word “vocation” is derived from that word. Vocation—we have secularized that word so much that we have lost the spirituality that goes with it! Vocation is about calling from God. For example, do you know what vocational choice that Calvin lifted up over that of being a minister? A politician! A public servant! For Calvin, there was spirituality in being a clerk, a teacher, a dog catcher, a waiter...and yes, a judge, doctor, and lawyer. Vocation and spirituality are intertwined.

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Spirituality is what brings us life. So let us continue to sing: “Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me. Make me, mold me, fill me, use me.” May we be gifted with that Christ-centered spirituality that points us toward our vocation, our calling.