

“High Spirits” – Acts 2:1-21 – Pentecost

It was chaos: “We were the first!” “No, we began to believe before you!” “But we put up our building first!” “Maybe, but we had our meetings first!” “Yeah, but we were persecuted more!” Just as in the very beginning of creation, all was chaos. But this time the chaos was in the church. The memories of those who had walked with Jesus had hardly begun to fade, when the disputes started to build within the church as to who was first. Arguments over which congregation actually started the church. Who was first, and where? And of course the claims of being first soon changed into claims of being best, or at least the most ‘authentic’.

We hear Paul addressing these very issues in his letters, dealing with the emerging factions and groups, for example from his letter to the congregation at Corinth. As is usual these claims to being first or being best often center around individuals or personalities: What I mean is that each of you says, “I belong to Paul,” or “I belong to Apollos,” or “I belong to Cephas,” or “I belong to Christ.” But it was clear that the divisions, the factions, the competitions had already begun, and the claims to being first were running rampant in the early church.

Those claims of being first seem harmless enough at first glance, but there’s almost always a problem connected with such claims. Claims to be first quickly become claims to be the best – the most authentic, the most right, the most true – and it was no different in the early church. In only a few years claims to being the most authentic escalated to a more sinister implication, namely that of being the only authentic church. By the time the gospels were written, and certainly by the time Luke penned the second half of his work, the Acts of the Apostles, those trends were already deeply set.

Not much has changed from those early days, has it? You don’t have to look far to find congregations, even denominations, who still lay claim to being not only the most authentic but also the only authentic component of the body of Christ. It’s fairly easy for some, like the Orthodox branches, to claim a historical ‘first’. However, it gets a little more difficult for later groups to claim to be ‘first’, because history obviously says otherwise, and so they have to modify what they mean by ‘first’. Since they can’t really claim to be first, they alter their posture to mean ‘firstmost’, or most important, and this usually takes the form of being ‘the most spiritual’.

There’s a huge irony in this in that such claims of being the most spiritual, or the ‘only’ spiritual, most often arise out of a misunderstanding of the description in Acts of the Pentecost event of conferring the Holy Spirit upon the disciples. The excitement and high spirits of that moment get interpreted today into claims that excitement is a necessary mark of the Spirit, a precursor for all of the other marks, including using hands as some kind of divine antennas. I must confess the image that I see is that of a group of children saying “pick me”, “pick me!” I don’t think that’s quite what Paul had in mind when he wrote in our reading from his letter to the Romans about being “children of God.” Now I really don’t have anything against various hand gestures as being representative of a sense of the Spirit moving within – but I do object to those who claim that not using such hand gestures indicates a lack of the Spirit moving within! I think the Spirit enters us through our hearts and minds, not our fingers.

In a similar way, speaking in tongues is now usually taken to mean uttering gibberish that only God can understand, and some faithful people take such behaviour as the only way of being declared a Christian. I often wish that people who fall into this mode of excited and exclusive behaviour would actually read their bibles instead of waving or thumping them! When you actually read the text, you discover that according to scripture such utterances are valid only when there is someone present to translate, and more especially that in the Pentecost event in Acts the tongues spoken were “natural languages”, with people present who could understand those languages. And lest there be any doubt or confusion, the text lists the languages that were used! And if anyone should believe that suddenly being able to speak in another language isn’t miracle enough, I would invite that person to sit in on a Korean class at UBC!

I guess we can understand why various churches would be keen to associate themselves with the Pentecost event. It seems clear that for Luke the Pentecost event was the real beginning of the church. Luke was obviously well aware of the conflicts boiling in the church as to who was the first, who was the best, and even who was the only, and so it was vitally important to him to relate the Pentecost event at the very beginning of the document that details the growth and expansion of the church throughout the whole known world. For Luke it was crucial to point out that the beginning of the church was not a people-event, but a God-event, an event that although with global impact could only occur in one place, the holy city of Jerusalem. From there the church would expand and grow, through Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth like expanding ripples on a pond when a stone is thrown in; but for Luke it could only have started in Jerusalem.

And for him also the birth of the church was – and could only be – God-inspired, delivered with the arrival of the promised Comforter, Counselor, Advocate, supporter and sustainer, the Holy Spirit delivered as promised by God. Not in isolation, of course, not as a spontaneous and unconnected event, but as the sealing of the new covenant in Christ, the fulfillment of the promise made by the One who was himself the fulfillment of God's promise of mercy, forgiveness and reconciliation, our Lord Jesus Christ.

So, if the answer to the question of “who formed the first church?” is God, and the answer to the question, “where did it begin?” is Jerusalem, the only question that remains is “who is part of, or who makes up the real church?” The answer to that important question is also given by Luke, as he quotes Peter quoting the prophet Joel, “In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh ...”, and “Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” Don't you find it fascinating that the very people who proclaim the loudest that we are “in the last days” are almost always the very ones who also proclaim loudly that “not all shall be saved”, meaning of course those who do not call upon the name of the Lord in the same way that they do? The text seems pretty simple and clear and unambiguous. The declaration from God through Joel and Peter is not conditional other than “calls on the name of the Lord”, and everyone who satisfies that one condition is saved. Those who would argue that “not everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” can only then claim that we are not really in the last days, but then the promise of God pouring out his Spirit upon all flesh would still be an unfulfilled promise, and that is clearly the opposite of what the Pentecost event was all about.

Well then, how do we determine who is part of the ‘real’ church? Paul answers that question fully in his letter to the Romans, and he is clear that “all who are led by the Spirit are children of God.” How can we tell who's led by the Spirit? What are those marks? The outward signs of the Spirit working within us are called the “fruits of the Spirit” and are listed in Galatians 5:22-23 as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Hmmm – self-control – isn't that the opposite of unrestrained enthusiasm? Generosity – isn't that the opposite of exclusiveness, and selfishness? Joy – isn't that the opposite of pessimism and negativity? Gentleness and kindness – aren't those the opposites of hurtful and rejecting? Are these inclusive and loving characteristics not the real “high spirits” with which we are called to celebrate God's love in Christ?

It is true that we are human, and thus we are sinners, and therefore we cannot be perfectly true to the gift of the Spirit working within us. However, as we are able to show love, or joy, or peace, or patience, or kindness, or generosity, or self-control we are showing evidence of God's Holy Spirit at work in us, and can know that we are indeed children of God. This gift of the Spirit is for us; it will not be revoked; our salvation is sure. But this gift is not ours alone, for it belongs to everyone who calls on the name of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who promised – and delivered – the comforter, the Holy Spirit.