

### **“Got Spirit?” – 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, all was chaos. In the church, that is. 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 as these arguments go, the claims of being first soon morphed into claims of being best, or at least the most ‘authentic’.

We hear Paul addressing these very issues in his letters, dealing with the coalescing 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.

The claims of being first seem harmless enough at first glance, but there’s almost always an associated problem with that, isn’t there? It isn’t long before claims to be first become claims to be the most authentic, or right, or true, and it was no different in the early church. Other examples from Paul’s letters show us congregations arguing over issues of belief, about how communion should be observed, or what to eat or not, or how to relate to the world just outside the door of the church. And not much time has to pass before claims to being the most authentic start to carry a second more sinister implication, namely that of being the only authentic church. By the time the gospels were written, certainly by the time Luke penned the second half of his work, the Acts of the Apostles, these 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’, but 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’. The most common damage that they do to the meaning of ‘first’ is to alter it 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 conferring of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples. The excitement of that moment gets translated today into excitement being the a necessary mark of the Spirit, a precursor for all of the other marks, including using hands as some kind of divine antennas. Now please don’t misunderstand me – I have nothing against various hand gestures as being representative of a sense of the Spirit moving within – my objection is against those who would claim that not using such hand gestures indicates a lack of the Spirit moving within!

In a similar way, speaking in tongues is now usually taken to mean uttering gibberish that only God can understand. I often wish that people who fall into this mode of exclusive behaviour would actually read their bibles instead of waving or thumping them! If they would actually read the text, they would 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! For anyone who believes that suddenly being able to speak in another language isn’t miracle enough, I would invite that person to sit in on one of our Korean classes!

But there's an even further and deeper irony to this misuse of the Pentecost event in Acts, and that derives from the description of the event being meant to convey the real beginning of the church. I'm sure that Luke was well aware of the emerging conflicts 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 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 it could only have started in Jerusalem.

And 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." I 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? The question that would seem to answer that is, to borrow a phrase from the advertising and dairy industries, "Got Spirit?" And to further the analogy with the "Got Milk?" ad, the question is largely rhetorical, meaning it doesn't require an answer because the answer is clearly 'yes'. The milk on the lips of the person in the ad signals that the answer is 'yes', and in a similar way the marks of the Spirit of the people in the real church also signal that the answer to the vital question "Got Spirit?" is also 'yes', or perhaps, "YES!" How can we tell? What are those marks? They are the outward signs of the Spirit working within us, what are called the "fruits of the Spirit" (Gal 5:22-23): 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? Gentleness and kindness – isn't those the opposites of hurtful and rejecting? While recognizing that we are human, and sinners, and cannot be perfectly true to the gift of the Spirit working within us, I'm sure that we can identify and recognize that insofar 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 thus answer the question, "Got Spirit?" with a firm proclamation of, "Yes, thanks be to God, and to His Son Jesus Christ upon whose name I call!"