

The Gritty Decision Leading Work of the Spirit

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Last week was Pentecost, the Sunday we commemorated the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and we saw the Spirit does flashy things like having people speak in foreign languages that they didn't know. But the Spirit also does less flashy things like enabling a Christian's witness to Christ, like engendering generosity, and like deepening relationships – speak clearly about Christ, share resources for Christ, and reach out to different kinds of people like Christ. This week in our nation implores us, doesn't it, to be Spirit-filled in these ways?

Our country recently has known riots and protests, economic and pandemic concerns, and severe political division. All of us are concerned ... and weary ... and uncertain of how to get to a place where we feel things are better. One of the messages from the book of Acts, that book describing Pentecost and the many manifestations of the Holy Spirit, is about conflict. Is there a message for us today? Let's pray.

Yes, there is conflict in Acts. Some of that early church conflict is from the outside in, outsiders persecuting Christians. Some of that, however, is from the inside in, insiders stirring things up ... some by deceit (as with Ananias and Saphira) and some by regular ol' differences of opinion (as with what to do with the Gentiles).

Difference of opinion can be pretty small (toe-may-toe or toe-maat-oe) or very substantive and critical (how to handle systemic inequities). In society we talk about substantive issues being economic crises, or irreversible climate change, or overcoming racism. The Bible would have us engage these. And further the Bible wants to get at the root of all roots, people finding peace with God and help from God. What is the truth or the essence about getting right with God and finding his peace and help? That's a substantive issue. Do you have to go to church? What if you're unwilling to give up extra-marital sex or bigotry? Can you still be a Christian?

I could go on with those kinds of questions to illustrate that we could get some hardcore debate on those matters with people coming out with very different answers. The huge debate for the early church was this -- let me put it this way, that Jesus was Jewish and he was opening the door to Gentiles but wasn't that for them to become Jewish? It may not seem big to us but it was to them. Whether we see it as big or not, the key part for us today is HOW did they handle a big issue?

By the way, they decided that Gentiles could call on God simply by reaching for him in need and faith. That essence of Jewishness, if you want to put it that way, is all the Jewishness Gentiles needed to adopt. They had had division and confusion. How did they get through that and come up with an answer? You can see, I'm sure, the relevance of this answer for us as Christians in a nation with division and confusion. I want you to see that they handled their division openly, collectively, biblically, strongly, and graciously. All this is nitty gritty Holy Spirit work.

Openly. Those Christians back then didn't ignore the issue or talk only in private in back rooms. You've had, you have had to have, haven't you, the experience of walking up to two people who are talking with a fair amount of energy about something but then they see you right there and suddenly the talking stops, and if continues, it is with a deliberately different tone? The early church, under the Holy Spirit, didn't do that. They said, "Let's talk openly." Don't say, for example, after the session meeting in the parking lot to your friend what you didn't say in the session meeting in front of everyone. That's what people who walk in the light do. It's what people who walk in the Spirit do.

Collectively. When two people are talking and suddenly stop when a third person shows up, that isn't only not open, it is partial. Only two of three are in on having a say and getting a listen. Interestingly, forced into virtual meetings by the pandemic, we're talking about what constitutes a bona-fide business meeting. Per Robert's Rules of Order the key is that everyone is given opportunity to *together* simultaneously listen

and hear. That's what the church did. They said, "Let's get together in one place at one time and talk this through."

Biblically. They took pains to ponder what God seemed to be up to in their situation and to connect it to what he said he would do in the Bible, to connect it to how he has been known to operate. In the Gentile situation they remembered verses about God enfolding the Gentiles and they noticed he wasn't making them become Jews before giving them the Spirit. So being Jewish must not be the most important thing. They didn't leave themselves to having to ping pong between this person or that person's opinion. They looked to the center-mass of the Bible for answers.

Strongly. They didn't mumble. They didn't say both sides were right. They made a decision and asked everyone to get on board. There's peace-making versus peace-faking. Peace-faking means appeasing, telling everyone what they want to hear. It may work for a little bit but it is no recipe for sound and lasting peace. Peacemaking is difficult work that involves trying to give clear answers. Can you imagine the Supreme Court routinely saying, "We totally agree with both of you"? We may not like their decision but it is, mercifully, a decision. The church came up with a strong decision.

Graciously. This is very important. The church came up with a strong decision but it was also gracious. There was no chastising or castigating or in-your-face stuff with those who thought that Gentiles were welcome IF they became Jewish. They didn't, it seems, indulge any who were petulant about the decision but on the other hand they seemed to move on with a charity and a "let's get behind this."

On week #2 of the season of Pentecost, I think we need to look to the Spirit to not only bring us peace with God but to make us peacemakers *for* God. This world needs not only people at peace but people who make peace. Let's take up these Spirit-induced ways into our own lives -- moving openly, collectively, biblically, strongly, and graciously. May it be so as all God's people agreed and said, Amen.

*If you would like to talk with someone about this message or your spiritual life, or have someone pray with you, the pastor and elders would welcome your call.
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