

An Approach to “Discerning the Spirit” (Part Two of a Keynote Address)

Colleagues,

Last week you got the first part of my address to the Crossings conference last January. In the course of introducing the overall topic and the several speakers involved, I did a riff of sorts on the core issue—the conundrum, as I called it—that thinkers of a Lutheran confessional bent keep returning to. There is Gospel, and there is Law. To put that another way, there are two distinct approaches that God takes to God’s work in the world. One is anchored in the death and resurrection of the Son of God. The other is not. The latter is every person’s default experience of God’s action in their lives. The former is known and recognized only by those who take Jesus’ Easter to be a matter of fact. This confidence of theirs lands them in the odd position of encountering and responding to God in two quite different ways as they about their days.

In today’s segment of the paper I put this observation to work in some fresh thinking (for me) about the Holy Spirit. The aim was to address some persistent confusions in a way that others would find clear and helpful, to say nothing of faithful. You’ll see as you read that I invited folks at the conference to critique what they were hearing. I pass the same invitation along to all of you.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce

The Spirit-given Challenge of the Double-Life *(continued)*

V. The Holy Spirit, Poorly Discerned

“Now we see as in a mirror, dimly.” –1 Cor. 13:12

As most of you know, Paul’s comment about the mirror is a piece of his counsel to a congregation that’s choking with dismay over a host of arguments. The one he’s speaking to directly in chapter 13 has to do with the Holy Spirit, understood as the immediate presence and power of God, a power that enables a person or persons to do things that otherwise cannot be done.

I repeat this: “Holy Spirit” equals “the immediate presence and power of God enabling a person or persons to do things that otherwise cannot be done.” I toss this out for our purposes here as an initial working definition. Had I the time, I’d go into it at length, but I don’t, so I won’t. We can talk about it later if you’d like.

In any case, the question at Corinth: who has the Spirit, and who does not? Of the haves, who has more, who has less, and how do you assess this? And finally, what about the deadbeat “have-nots”? Once you’ve figured out who they are, how do you deal with them?

Really, has there ever been a moment in the life of the Church when this argument wasn’t raging—somewhere, in some form? Since I don’t imagine that my own baptized lifetime is a weird aberration from every other Christian lifetime, my answer is no. Who has the Spirit? Or to cloak the question in other terms, who’s the real Christian, the serious Christian, the better, the wiser, the more faithful Christian, the true believer, the orthodox believer, the ortho-practical believer whose Spirit-given faith is proved in Spirit-given works—she gives a hand for the poor, you see, as the deadbeats do not. Unlike them, she

digs for root causes.

“We take the Bible seriously as the infallible, Spirit-breathed Word of God—you rascals don’t.” This too is a form of the Corinthian argument. When I was a first-year student at Concordia Seminary across the river, it tore my school apart. As for its several eruptions in the brief history of the ELCA, I’d rather not go there this evening—again, time forbids it, and for that my stomach is really quite grateful; though let me point out even so how each and every wrangle of the past 28 years has been punctuated—in some cases dominated—by loud and strident talk of the Spirit, the *Holy Spirit*, who either encourages representational quotas or abhors them, who either sees suddenly fit to authorize gay marriage or continues as ever to empower gay celibacy, not that he/she/it has ever made like the hand at Belshazzar’s feast, inscribing his/her/its definitive opinion *for right now* on the screens at a churchwide assembly; though even then we’d haggle about it. We’d do that in part because it’s so, so hard to trust each other, especially when it comes to matters of “the Spirit.” “Which spirit is at work here?” we have to ask. We ask it because we all sense how the spirits at work in the world are legion, and how all but the One are *un-*holy, some vividly so; and how every sinner’s mind and heart is riddled with them.

So the quarrels go on, and the factions multiply. Welcome to the history of the church—most all of which, by the way, will strike most baptized folk as more or less irrelevant as they step into their days. Their question, if they even think to ask it any more, is whether this Spirit they hear about—this presence and power of God enabling *them* to do what can’t be done—has any role to play at all in their daily routines. Most, I’m guessing, are guessing not.

VI. God’s Power in Two Forms (Type E, Type X)

Though even as I say this, I need to clarify, or, as we Lutherans keep saying, to distinguish; to spot another two-ness in the ways of God with humankind, and point it out. Are people in the pews clamoring for signs of the power of God at work in their lives? Of course they are; though what they ache for—some so urgently that they’ll muster cohorts of prayer warriors to beg for it—is a specific form of God’s power, the one that works *on* me as *object*, and does so *especially* in the details of everyday life. So, for example, it kills the cancer. It averts the car wreck. It lands the promotion. It punches the numbers for the winning lottery ticket if I’m crass enough to play the lottery. Perhaps it breaks my addiction to playing the numbers. For purposes here, let’s call this Power, Type E, where “E” stands for “everyday.”

Now this is *not* the power that the rubric “Holy Spirit” covers—or so I suggest, and with all my heart I invite you to test this with me later. Spirit-power works, not *on* me as object, but *through* me as agent. Again, it enables me to do what otherwise I could not do, with others as the beneficiaries of the doing that gets done. So in Luke’s Gospel, for example, it empowers me to bear a child in my virginity, or to sing a Nunc Dimittis in my senescence, or to scatter nasty spirits, or to look you in the eye and forgive your sins with a straight face. It even stoops so low and small as to twist my criminal head in Jesus’ direction and give me just enough breath to croak out, “Lord, remember me...”— and this, mind you, to the future comfort and edification of millions upon millions of other criminal sinners, the present assembly included.

Which brings us, of course, to the main point, the most important one of all: Spirit-power is inextricably intertwined in the apostolic witness with God’s great doing for us all in Jesus Christ. So to keep *this* clear, and again for present purposes, let’s call this God’s Power Type X, where X signifies

Christ and the cross we killed him on.

Type X power is *not* the power that the Lutheran people I know best are hankering and pining for right now as their days dribble by, at least not that I can tell. It's not the power they're praying for as they head to work or school on Monday morning, if indeed they're praying at all. You lay folk should know that there's not a preacher in this room who won't blanch when she confronts the text we're given to read this coming summer, 10th Sunday after Pentecost, Luke 11: "If," says Jesus, "you...who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit"—implication: *the* best gift ever—"to those who ask him!" Well, sure; and even now I see it, all those eyes staring blankly at me as people wonder how they could even start to want what Jesus touts here; and really, it's my job as preacher to get them thirsting for it? *Kyrie eleison*—or so I mutter as I plan a quick vacation and line up the sub.

All of which is simply to observe that we Lutherans are strangely lousy on this topic of the Spirit. To use a term that will surface again and again in our time together, we struggle to *discern* it. That's assuming, again, that we even to think to look for it; though when we do, as in seminaries or grave assemblies, how quick we are to rip ourselves to shreds, Corinthian style. People tend to do that when they're stumbling through a haze of thick confusion. Ergo this conference.

VII. Discerning the Spirit: The Essential *Satis Est*

Strangely lousy, I say; weirdly confused. Of all Christians, Lutherans have the least excuse to be murky and confused about the Holy Spirit, aka, God's Power Type X. After all, we've got St. Paul in our corner, don't we? And with him, of course, comes Luther, Melancthon tagging along.

We have some seminarians with us. Have you heard yet about the *satis est*? That's the label for one of the great assertions of the Augsburg Confession, so often ignored, also by Lutherans. Article VII: "It is enough—in Latin *satis est*—for the true unity of the church to agree concerning the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments."

Behind this, I submit, lies the original *satis est*, the one we got to hear this past Sunday as Paul took up the Spirit-specific questions that were seething at Corinth.

"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." That, says Paul, is the baseline test for God's Type X power, present and in action.

Really? But it sounds so simple, so trifling, so unworthy of divine majesty, so easy to do: three little words, anyone can say them, can't they? Answer: no, they can't. My old teacher, Ed Schroeder, has a great story about this. He got it from his colleague, Robert Bertram, the co-founder with him of this little Crossings outfit. Perhaps he'll tell it later, or if not, go ask him. Or even better, you can run your own test on the way home. Walk around the rest stop or the airport lounge, and ask everyone you meet to say it: "Jesus is Lord." Guess what: it will not happen, and I will cheerfully lay a bet on that. A big bet. Not that I have to worry at all about losing the bet. Even now you're all cringing as all Lutherans always do at the thought of even attempting the experiment as proposed. It means sticking out your Christian neck.

Still, among our own it sounds so easy, too easy: "Jesus is Lord." No, we say to each other, it isn't enough, *satis non est*. There has got to be more, so much, much more, to this faith and life that God the Holy Spirit uses Type X power to generate; and

before you know it we've invented more, we've piled it on. Jesus-is-Lord plus. Plus Easter celebrated according to the correct calendar—that was way back when. Plus ministry organized in the right, the proper manner—a huge thing that's been for Lutherans in America. Jesus-is-Lord *plus* all doctrines correctly parsed and sufficiently choked down, Jesus-is-Lord *plus* all proper behavior that properly reflects a sanctified life, as we like to put it, and now let's go to war over which behaviors these are. Can you drink a glass of beer or not? Can a Christian vote Republican—or is that Democrat?

All of which reflects a couple of huge and stupid mistakes that all Christians should be mightily ashamed of, though Lutherans in particular.

Mistake number one: the moment I add “plus” to “Jesus-is-Lord” I've invented an oxymoron, insulting Jesus in the process. Jesus is *not* Lord if a simple confidence in him is not enough to get us counted among the saints. At best he's Lord-lite, sharing his throne with whatever else we've ginned up and added on to anchor and define our Christian identity. That includes, by the way, those extra things we dig up from the Bible. Circumcision, say. Never getting a divorce, an add-on that some people here are old enough to remember vividly.

Mistake number two: to add a plus of any kind to “Jesus is Lord” is to show how clueless I am about the very thing I've just confessed. “All things are yours, whether Paul, Apollos, Cephas, life, death, the present, the future, all are yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.” That's Paul in chapter 3 of 1st Corinthians spelling out what the Lordship of Jesus signifies for those folks at a point when they're still behaving very badly. Or again to the Ephesians, chapter 2: “God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together

with Christ...and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus"—made us, raised us, seated us, past tense, done deal. Or now Peter chiming in, 1st letter, chapter 2: "you *are* a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, proclaiming the mighty acts of him who called you of darkness," this as opposed to ginning up of heap of extras to prove that you belong.

Yes, and all this is wrapped up and encompassed in that tawdry little three word package, Jesus is Lord—but then we're Lutherans, aren't we? And isn't Luther the thinker who, more than any other, has followed Paul in recognizing how God delights in hiding his best stuff in the least appealing places—a manger, yes, encircled by stinking shepherds; or far, far worse, that awful, terrible cross, surrounded by sinners? And to that there's something I can add, or you?

But to spot this stuff; to credit this stuff, to sing with joy on its account; to turn around and *use* this stuff—that takes power, incredible power, God's power Type X, the first and greatest gift that the Holy Spirit gives. Without it, we are sunk.

—to be continued.