

1 Cor 12: 3b- 16
Many Gifts, One Giver—But Which One?

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"Have you received the Spirit?" That is a question I've been asked more than once in my lifetime. Maybe you have, too. "Have you received the Spirit?" At least twice the question was put to me by complete strangers, once by the passenger sitting next to me in a plane, another time by a young saleswoman who waited on me in a neighborhood hardware store. I've been asked the question also by my charismatic and Pentecostal students. "Have you received the Spirit?" Have you ever been asked that? I can see by your noddings that some of you have.

When you do get asked that question, "Have you received the Spirit," before you answer yes or no, you might first ask the questioner a counter-question, "Which spirit?" She asked you, "Have you received the spirit," but then you should ask back — ever so politely, not with a chip on your shoulder — "Have I received which spirit?" Your counter-question may surprise her and she may protest, "What do you mean, "which spirit!" There is only one spirit, the Holy Spirit." No, you explain nicely, that is not really true. There are many spirits. Only one of them is the Holy Spirit. If you are going to use the language of Scripture, which definitely does talk about the Spirit, then you ought to recognize as the scriptures do, there are all sorts of other spirits besides: some of them pretty good, some of them downright evil. But only one of them is the Holy Spirit. Only one is a hallowing Spirit, a hallowing Spirit, a healing Spirit.

In fact, as our Scripture lesson today reminds us, one of the most important gifts from the Holy Spirit is what Paul calls "the discernment of spirits." (v. 10) That is, it takes a special gift from the Holy Spirit just to be able to tell the difference between her, the Holy Spirit, and all the other spirits. What is that difference? How can you tell?

For example, Bill does not like his job at the license bureau. Why not? Well, because, as he says, there is "a nasty spirit" there among the workers and between the workers and the management: they gossip about one another, they are rude to the customers. Now it doesn't take a space scientist to figure out that the spirit in that place is not the Holy Spirit. Still, not all spirits are nasty. I've heard it said about the Montreal Expos that, even though their pay-scale is the lowest in the major leagues, they still have a very healthy "team spirit." Then is that the Holy Spirit? No. Healthy as it is, that is not what Paul means by the Hallowing Spirit. Even Jesus, who drove out unclean spirits, admitted that those spirits too, even though they were unclean, could easily fool you, because they too might heal you of this or that ailment. Still, they were not the Hallowing Spirit. In fact, they might be the Hallowing Spirit's enemies, all the more dangerous because they can so easily fool you by their sensational miracles.

Or, as another example, a convention is trying to reach agreement on some difficult decision. Finally the chairman calls the vote. The resolution carries by a large majority. The chairman announces, "Obviously the spirit of this body favors the resolution." The chairman is right. But was that the Holy Spirit? Is that how you can tell? By a majority vote? What if it is the majority vote of a Christian congregation — say, this congregation? Does that prove it was the doing of the Holy Spirit? I recall that this very congregation, twenty years ago, was driven out of its own church body. The Missouri Synod, by that denomination's majority vote. Was that the Holy Spirit? There must be a better way of "discerning [distinguishing] the spirits" from the one and only Holying Spirit.

Clue #1. Says Paul to the Corinthians, "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit." (v. 3b) There, that is one sure-fire way of telling whether the spirit we are dealing with in this or that situation is indeed the Holy Spirit. Namely, does this spirit give us the power to say, "Jesus is Lord?" If not, it is not the Holy Spirit. Some spirit or other it may well be, but not the Healing, Hallowing Spirit. For no other spirit but the Holy Spirit of God could admit that "Jesus is Lord." Nor could you or I admit that "except by the Holy Spirit."

Years ago Thelda and I were at a conference in Michigan for university professors from all over the country. It was not a particularly religious conference, but one of the speakers was Dr. Paul Holmer, professor of philosophy from Yale, himself a Christian — and always a very provocative teacher. In the course of his address he quoted this gutsy verse from First Corinthians, "No one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit." As soon as Holmer had finished his speech a man from the audience challenged him. The man, as I recall, was a professor of Jewish studies at City University of New York. He objected to what Paul had said — both Paul Holmer and the Apostle Paul — namely, that a person would need some special spirit to be able to say "Jesus Is Lord." "That's foolish," said the New Yorker, "why, anyone could say that." To which Holmer replied, "Go ahead, let's hear you say it." There was absolute silence. You could have heard a pin drop. Finally, Holmer continued: "Next question?"

Thank goodness, not everyone is as honest as that Jewish professor. The reason he could not say "Jesus is Lord" is that he did not believe that. His own conscience — and, I would guess, the Holy Spirit — kept him tongue-tied. But not everybody, not even everybody in the church, has that much integrity. For which I say, thank goodness. What if the only time people ever said "Jesus is Lord" is when they sincerely meant it? How often would it ever get said? How often would the gospel get preached, or hymns get sung, or Christian prayers get prayed? Now I'm not excusing hypocrisy. Jesus was very clear about hypocrites: "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord' will enter into the kingdom of heaven." Still, even hypocrites - - and it may well be one of them who is speaking to you this moment -- do help to get the Word out that "Jesus is Lord" in spite of themselves, in spite of the fact that personally they stand condemned by their hypocrisy. Thank goodness not for hypocrisy but for the fact that somebody, anybody, is calling Jesus "Lord." Only the Holy Spirit could bring off that miracle, says Paul. It does not take a true believer to say "Jesus is Lord." But it does take the Holy Spirit.

That is the way, the first way of testing which spirit is the Holy Spirit: does She get people to say "Jesus is Lord?" It's as simple a test as that. The test is that public, that out-in-the-open, that audible: so audible that Chuck Lange could conduct the test with his tape recorder. To check whether it's really the Holying Spirit who is with us we don't first have to examine each other's hearts, to probe who is truly sincere and who is faking it. You don't have to worry whether I personally believe what I'm preaching to you. I hope I do believe it but, regardless, all you need to listen for is "Jesus is Lord." And if that is what is coming through, then you are receiving the Holy Spirit. When you receive the cup from Flo Saeger afterwhile and you hear her say "The blood of Christ shed for you," you need not wonder whether she means what she says. Fact is, she does. But it is Christ's blood for your forgiveness even if she did not mean it.

In a moment you will be saying to one another, "The peace of the Lord be with you." And you will be receiving exactly that, the Lord's own peace, even if the parishioner who speaks it doesn't happen to have his heart in it at the moment. If the Holy Spirit has to, She can operate in overdrive, overriding our cold hearts, our insincerity, and still get us to say to the needy neighbor, "Jesus is Lord." And what the neighbor is getting from us is still, regardless of us, the gospel truth. Thanks to the Holy Spirit.

Clue # 2. Says Paul to the Corinthians, "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit." (v. 4) "Varieties!" Is Paul naive? "Varieties!" Is that what he calls the turmoil in Corinth? This bickering, strifetorn, conflicted congregation: "varieties?" If you ask me, it looks more like mayhem. Why, from Paul's own letters to this Corinthian congregation anyone can see that it was more like a badly dysfunctional family, like Bosnia. And Paul knows that. He has told them so, very bluntly. Yet he suddenly plays down the congregation's in-fighting and divisions and smooths them over with a nice word, "variety." And then on top of that he adds, "varieties of gifts." "Gifts" yet! That's the last thing I would have called them. Any objective newspaper reporter covering this congregation in Corinth would have called things by their name. He would have called them prejudices, arguments, conflicting opinions. But "gifts," "varieties of gifts?" Never.

Yet on second thought, we should never say "never" when we are speaking about the Spirit, the Holy Spirit. And it is that spirit about whom Paul is here speaking. That is the Spirit by whom he is speaking, the Holying Spirit. Paul is not flattering or soft-soaping the Corinthians. He is not just a schmoozing politician, a spin- doctor putting a nice appearance on an ugly mess. No, speaking in the Spirit, Paul is holying, healing, hallowing the mess. Remember, sisters and brothers, whom does the Holy Spirit call "Lord?" Jesus! "Jesus is Lord." Will you please, out loud repeat those three words with me, "Jesus is Lord?" Thank you. And it is from him, Jesus, that the Spirit takes her cue. That is why Paul can speak of the Corinthian congregation, fractured as it is, as optimistically as he does, as a variety of gifts. And why? Because he is speaking by the one Spirit who calls Jesus the "Lord."

Let me explain. The Holy Spirit is a name-dropper, majoring in the name "Jesus." But like Jesus, the Holy Spirit then proceeds accordingly to re-name everything else that now

belongs to Jesus. What a newspaper/reporter would call ghastly and morbid, namely Jesus' execution, the Holy Spirit re-names "The Holy Cross," "The Cross of Glory," and she mounts that cross proudly on church steeples for everyone to see and hangs it tastefully on gold chains around women's pretty necks. What anyone else looking in on the Corinthian congregation would call sinners, the Holy Spirit re-names "saints." What I, looking in on Luther Memorial Church, might be tempted to call arguments and conflicts and hurts, the Spirit hallows and re-names "variety." What some cynic might misunderstand in our congregation as this member's "pet theory" or that member's "crackpot idea" or that other member's "half-baked opinion" or that other member's "sentimentalism" is not really that at all anymore. Instead, speaking through Paul, the Holy Spirit now calls these things by their new names in Christ Jesus: "gifts" — the gift of "knowledge" or, if not knowledge, then the gift of "wisdom" or, if not wisdom, the gift of "healing" or "interpretation." And all, says Paul, "for the common good." (v. 7)

It is amazing, when a cross turns into resurrection, when Christians on Pentecost wear red, the color of blood, to celebrate the opposite, life, when sinners are re-named saints, when strong differences of opinion are re-named "varieties of gifts" — I say, it is amazing how people and things then actually do become what the Spirit names them to be. They really do become in fact, not just in name, members of the same one body. And their differences, no matter how deep, actually do start meshing together once the Spirit re-names them "varieties of gifts" "for the common good." What's in a Name? Answer: a whole new future, a whole new change of heart, a whole New Creation. But then, that's what you learn to expect once you remember Whose Body this is: Jesus. And the Spirit who helps us remember this Jesus is the same Spirit who re-members us, one member after the other, into that same Body of Christ. Amen.

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